

Tesla's 2020 reopening led to hundreds of COVID-19 infections among workers, county health data show

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After nearly a year of stonewalling, the Alameda County Department of Public Health (ACDPH) in the California Bay Area released data showing electric vehicle manufacturer Tesla reported approximately 440 workers were infected with COVID-19 at their Fremont plant between May and December 2020. The data confirm what many workers knew from the outset: that reopening the factory was not safe and needlessly risked their health and lives.

Last May, multibillionaire Tesla CEO Elon Musk illegally restarted production at the Fremont factory, defying an Alameda County public health order. Musk had continuously sought to downplay the danger posed by the pandemic, tweeting that “coronavirus panic is dumb,” railing against what he called “fascist” public health measures and threatening to shut down the Fremont plant entirely and relocate it to another state.

Alameda County caved within short order to Musk's ultimatum, allowing the plant to proceed with reopening on the condition that it implement unspecified “safety recommendations.”

Tesla's reckless efforts to restart operations met with the full-throated support of then-President Trump, who tweeted at the time, “California should let Tesla & @elonmusk open the plant, NOW. It can be done Fast & Safely!”

The move also garnered the active or tacit backing of the Democratic Party, with California Governor Gavin Newsom seeking to present the dispute as a local matter, while professing his “great reverence” for Tesla.

Shortly after the reopening in May, Tesla workers protested against this unsafe measure, demanding transparent information about the spread of COVID-19

in the facility. Although workers were initially told that they could remain on unpaid leave if they did not feel safe, several workers, including protest organizer Carlos Gabriel, reported being fired after failing to return to work.

The Fremont plant's reopening—along with the feverish stock market speculation and run-up in Tesla's share price—has allowed Musk to enrich himself on a grotesque and an almost historically unprecedented scale. He briefly became the world's richest person, seeing his fortune balloon from \$40 billion last May to over \$200 billion in January, before subsiding to “only” \$175 billion more recently.

A former worker at the Fremont plant told the World Socialist Web Site that he was not surprised that COVID-19 had been allowed to spread widely at the plant, and that cases had been concealed. “From the day I started they'd lie about numbers. Fraud is the name of the game there. It does not matter as long as they get the funding and the numbers look good.”

The infection data were only released due to an extensive public records request campaign by the non-profit organization PlainSite, which focuses on legal data transparency. PlainSite published the information on its Twitter feed on March 12. For months, ACDPH refused to release any data related to Tesla's reports of workplace COVID-19 spread, absurdly citing Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) medical privacy laws.

An Alameda County judge, in a separate lawsuit brought by the California Newspapers Partnership, confirmed the obvious: Disclosing anonymized information on COVID-19 spread does not violate employee medical privacy. Subsequently, ACDPH

released the monthly infection counts, submitted by Tesla to the county as part of its reopening agreement, only after additional threats of litigation by PlainSite.

The data show approximately 10 cases (“less than 11”) reported in May, which, as the Washington Post has noted, contradicts prior statements by ACDPH claiming that no county residents were affected by workplace infections last May at Tesla. Even if this claim is technically true, and all infections reported in May were among the many residents of other counties who work in the factory, it was clearly designed to give the false impression that there were no cases in the factory.

A total of at least 440 infections (after May, all totals are given exactly) represents an infection rate of nearly 5 percent out of Tesla’s roughly 10,000-strong Fremont workforce, which nevertheless could still be a significant undercount. PlainSite also noted that an internal Tesla document detailed a significant level of known COVID-19 exposures among workers at the plant during the months of May and June in 2020, far below the number of cases reported to the county for that time.

No other information was provided by ACDPH, and the number of hospitalizations, deaths, transmission sources, or other indications of the severity of disease or manner of spread remain unknown.

The failure of ACDPH to report data after December 2020 is noteworthy, as the recently enacted state law AB 685 requires employers to report all COVID-19 outbreaks to local health agencies beginning in January 2021. To date, the California Department of Public Health has posted no data from these reports. A message on the department’s website dated December 31, 2020, states, “The California Department of Public Health will begin posting data pursuant to AB 685 on its website in the coming weeks as related outbreak reports are received.”

The outbreaks at the Fremont plant highlights the role of the Democratic Party as an accomplice of Tesla and other major corporations, conspiring to wring profits out of workers under unsafe conditions.

Governor Newsom and other Democrats initially enacted half-measures to slow the spread of COVID-19, such as limited lockdowns with little to no financial support for affected workers. These measures in themselves were only implemented after autoworkers

launched a series of wildcat strikes in March, defying efforts by the companies and the United Auto Workers union to keep the plants open.

Now, Newsom and the California Democrats are hurrying to throw open schools, following the lying claim of the Biden administration that children will not contract and transmit the virus to their families. The common thread between the reopening of Tesla and the reopening of schools is clear, that children must be herded back to school so their parents can return to work producing surplus value for the billionaires.

It is noteworthy that union auto plants have not fared substantially better than the nonunion Tesla facility. The Detroit Three auto plants were prematurely reopened in mid-May 2020, around the same time or not long after Tesla, with the full backing of the UAW. The minimal safety procedures used by the union to justify reopening have long since been largely cast aside, while cases have been covered up and workers who speak out victimized by both management and the UAW.

In response, workers at a number of plants have formed rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the UAW, calling for a shutdown of nonessential production until the pandemic is contained, with full compensation for workers in the meantime.

The WSWS urges workers at Tesla to follow their brothers and sisters in the auto industry and contact us to discuss initiating rank-and-file safety committees, linking up in a network internationally to coordinate the fight for workers’ health, safety and other rights. These committees must be completely independent of and hostile to the Democrats, Republicans and trade unions such as the UAW, who function as bought-and-paid-for arms of corporate management.

Such committees will take as their starting point what workers actually need, not the profit calculations of Tesla and billionaire oligarchs such as Musk.



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