

Indications of rising COVID-19 cases at Baltimore-area Amazon fulfillment centers

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In the past week, the *World Socialist Web Site International Amazon Workers Voice* (IAWV) has received a number of reports from Amazon workers in the Baltimore area revealing a growing number of COVID-19 infections in their facilities.

“They’re spreading like wild fire,” said Fred, a worker at the BWI5 Fulfillment Center (FC), referring to COVID-19 infections. The worker’s name has been changed to protect him from retaliation. Fred shared with the IAWV a generic Amazon text alert which said that the company was “recently notified that individuals who work at BWI5 have received a confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis.”

According to the alert, they “were last onsite on 3/21/2021–3/27/2021.” Keeping with Amazon’s well-established practice of not sharing pertinent details, such as the number of cases or the departments that infected individuals frequented, the alert reveals that an untold number of COVID-19 infections have been spotted at the FC throughout the week.

Another worker, a leading member of the Amazon independent rank and file safety committee at BWI2 facility, stated that the company had begun putting up Plexiglas walls around work stations. “They aren’t saying anything in words, but their actions tell you things are getting worse.” Another worker at the facility stated that conditions had become “deadly.”

Maryland has seen over 400,000 COVID-19 infections since the pandemic began. In the past month, the state’s daily case rate has nearly doubled, from around 750 cases daily in early March to 1,200 now. Cases in the Baltimore area have doubled over the same period.

The increase in infections come after Maryland Republican governor Larry Hogan dropped basic social distancing measures to contain the pandemic. It has

taken less than a month for the decision, which was implemented without input from the state’s coronavirus task force, to create a public health crisis.

Given the fact that major industrial sites have played a major role in the spread of infections, it is possible that Amazon bears a considerable responsibility for this rising caseload. The company operates four Fulfillment Centers (FC), two sorting centers, five delivery stations, Prime and Air hubs as well as nearly a dozen Whole Foods locations, employing thousands of workers altogether, in the Baltimore area.

The growth in infections follows the announcement in February that Amazon would return to in-person “stand up” meetings for all staff members. It has announced that the meetings, which consist of groups of workers gathering to engage in warm up exercises and other unsafe practices, will become daily requirements again this month.

Workers have reported rising numbers of cases connected in particular to Amazon Fulfillment Engine (AFE) departments in the fulfillment centers. The AFEs receive goods from the shipping docks, which are then put through a three-part process involving “induction,” in which a worker places items inside a plastic tote and sends them to be “re-binned.” A re-binner then separates items from the totes and gives them to a packer, who then prepares the items to be shipped out.

One worker described the AFE department as the “COVID pit.” “AFE’s are really bad. They can stink,” the worker said. He described the department as “super-hot and fast paced,” where “managers tell you a rate [the amount of merchandise a worker is supposed to handle on a minute-by-minute basis] that is more than the required amount.”

If pickers—workers who bring items from the shipping docks to the AFE—bring goods to the wrong area, then

rotting, unsorted food and other things can accumulate in the department, creating a multitude of hazards. Social distancing is almost non-existent in these areas, and masks, which can hinder breathing in such a fast-paced environment, often wind up around a person's chin. "Eighty percent of people don't wear their masks properly" down there, the worker said. He added that managers didn't enforce masks as long as workers "do their jobs."

A recent company email, forwarded to the IAWV by an AFE worker, explained that Amazon is ending its staggered shift policy on April 11. "This change allows us to both maintain our social distancing commitment to keeping each other safe *while also improving our Outbound work flow and building capacity to better serve our customers* [emphasis added]," the email reads. In other words, the company is planning on ending its staggered shift policy to increase profits.

"They're horrendously disorganized," the worker said, adding, "but when it comes to controlling you, they're masters."

Like the suspension of stand-up meetings, the staggered shift times were minor concessions granted to workers during the first weeks of the pandemic. As with the removal of \$2 hazard pay and the ending of unlimited unpaid time off (UPT) last spring and summer, the reversion to old routines is part of Amazon's effort to claw back the safety measures implemented in the first months of the pandemic.

Last year, a wave of wildcat strikes by auto, manufacturing and logistics workers forced a temporary shutdown at auto plants and other major manufacturers. Those strikes, which involved thousands of Amazon workers in Europe and North America, saved untold lives. However, these work stoppages were largely uncoordinated, and the companies, with assistance from the United Auto Workers and other bribed and corrupt trade unions, were able to force workers back on the jobs as the pandemic continued to devastate the population.

In response, workers began building, with the assistance of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party, their own independent rank and file safety committees in order to expose and oppose unsafe working conditions, and to begin preparations for a general strike to halt the homicidal policies being adopted by corporations and their

political representatives in the United States and internationally. This includes the formation of a committee at Amazon's BWI2 warehouse in the Baltimore area.

To join a committee at your workplace, or for help forming one, contact the World Socialist Web Site by filling out the form at wsws.org/workers.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact