

Amazon announces end to mask policy in its warehouses

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On Wednesday, the nearly one million Amazon workers throughout the United States received an automated text alert notifying them that as of Monday, May 24 the company would allow fully-vaccinated employees to go without masks while on the job, “unless mandated by state or local regulations.”

According to the alert, employees at least two weeks past receiving full vaccination may enter their vaccine information in the A to Z Amazon phone app, claim a \$40 bonus from the company if they “have not already done so,” and receive a check mark on their profiles to show to staff at temperature check points at the building entrance. Doing this will allow Amazonians to forego masks. In later weeks, Amazon will provide vaccinated employees with stickers to wear on their personnel badges. Starting “mid-June,” the A to Z app will begin requiring workers to upload their vaccine card information.

The announcement comes a week after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), announced that all vaccinated individuals in the United States “can participate in indoor and outdoor activities, large or small, without wearing a mask or physical distancing.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time, the new guidance, which flew in the face of the broad views of public health experts, was “a political, not a scientific, decision” intended to “signal that all measures that impinge on business interests, from social distancing requirements to enhanced sanitary guidelines, are to be dropped.”

This was confirmed, as US states and a wide number of employers announced an abrupt end to their masking policies. At the time, Amazon had called the announcement “very positive” and “great news” but insisted that until the company could determine how to

apply the new rules, face coverings were “still required.”

“It has been over a year [since the pandemic started] and Amazon is still trying to take shortcuts,” said Trey, a member of the BWI2 Amazon Rank-and File Safety Committee in Baltimore, in response to the announcement. The committee, an organization set up and run by rank-and-file Amazon workers to defend themselves and their co-workers against the unsafe and exploitative practices of the company, was formed in December.

Trey recalled that the company regularly fails to notify its employees when they have been exposed to someone testing positive. “Now I’m supposed to trust an ‘honor system’ [where everyone reports their vaccination status honestly],” he stated. Other workers, including one recently infected by COVID-19, insisted that “it’s far too early to consider this action,” as the company is “still sending out almost daily alerts of multiple new positive cases.”

The announcement comes as Amazon is in the midst of a massive hiring spree, with a target of adding 75,000 more workers to its nearly 1.2 million-strong global workforce. This is being coupled with a plan to award raises to over 500,000 members of its workforce throughout the month of May.

Workers speaking to the IAWV have denounced these policies as attempts to “incentivize” workers to take jobs under conditions of increased safety risks. In addition, such a hiring spree will create conditions for mass spreader events as it will add thousands of new employees to Amazon’s ranks, many of whom will not be familiar with the details of the new rules.

Demonstrating the dangers presented by the rapidly shifting public safety guidelines, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the United States’ top infectious disease expert, noted

in a deliberately understated appeal Thursday, that “[u]nfortunately some people interpreted [the CDC announcement] as everyone can get rid of their mask, which is not the case.” Already, stories of individuals showing up at business places without masks, regardless of regional and local policies, have been featured in the media.

Throughout the pandemic, Amazon has shed even the miniscule precautions it adopted at the beginning of the pandemic. The company eliminated the token \$2 hourly hazard pay bonuses over a year ago. Starting in February, the company rapidly began removing other safety measures. It has brought back in-person “stand-up” informational meetings and ending the staggering of shifts in recent months.

Despite the temporary inclusion of largely cosmetic safety precautions, which were instituted to defuse worker militancy in opposition to the company’s relentless exploitation, the company has still recorded tens of thousands of COVID-19 cases. In October, Amazon officials announced that at least 20,000 Amazonians had been infected. That count, from nearly eight months ago, is long out of date.

Over the same period that thousands of workers were infected in Amazon facilities, corporate CEOs enjoyed a surge in their wealth, with Amazon founder and former-CEO Jeff Bezos’ personal fortune increasing to over \$200 billion throughout the pandemic. The deaths of Amazon workers, such as 38-year old Poushawn Brown, who died of unknown causes after working in the company’s warehouses, have meanwhile been swept under the rug by the corporation, which has not bothered to tally COVID-19 deaths at its facilities.

While the corporation falsely insists that workers are protected from the further spread of the pandemic in its facilities, the removal of all restraints, including masks for the vaccinated, will be used by Amazon management as an excuse to eliminate any responsibility to monitor COVID-19 infections in the workplace, take safety measures or provide sick leave for workers.

On Monday, Amazon announced a new initiative called WorkingWell, which will utilize “physical, mental and nutritional support, among other wellness services,” according to *CNBC*. The company has stated that the wellness program’s aim is to reduce “recordable incident rates,” or injuries, by 50 percent

by 2025. As the *International Amazon Workers Voice* has written, this program and others like it will be used as cover to impose ever-higher levels of exploitation on its workforce while placing the onus for inevitable workplace injuries on the employees.



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