

Amazon rank-and-file responds to company decision to bring back masks as COVID-19 surges: Too little, too late

Baltimore Amazon Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee
16 August 2021

On August 6, Amazon's employee app sent out a notice informing workers that effective August 9, face coverings would once again be required in all its facilities. This new Amazon requirement came only a few months after it had dropped the mask protocol.

In May, Amazon had sent out an automated text to its nearly one million-strong American workforce announcing that those that were vaccinated would be allowed to work without masks beginning May 24, unless otherwise required by state or local rules. At the time, the Baltimore Amazon Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee warned that this policy would "put the blame for any continued spread of COVID-19 on the workers themselves," while also "absolving [Amazon] and its reckless policies of any of the blame."

While Amazon was celebrating the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention decision to prematurely lift masks among vaccinated individuals, the Baltimore Amazon Workers Rank-and-File Committee warned that "[t]here is no reason to believe that the pandemic has ended." Less than two months later, we have been proven right.

As we have warned throughout the pandemic, Amazon and the capitalist class more broadly are putting the costs and suffering of the worst public health crisis in over a century on the backs of the working class. In the week between Amazon's announcement that it was bringing back its mask requirement and the following Monday, the number of COVID-19 cases in the United States rose by about 360,000.

How many of those 360,000 cases were Amazonians? We don't know because Amazon fails to publicly report its daily case numbers at its locations. The only information we receive is in the form of text alerts when unidentified "individuals" have tested positive at our facilities.

While Amazon is now focusing once again on wearing masks, it has still abandoned all other measures which were originally implemented at the beginning of the pandemic in its own warehouses.

The floor areas and conference rooms once devoted to self-administered nasal swab tests, which were already inadequate, have been removed. Managers treat mask and distancing policies with disdain, reinstating standup meetings and violating six feet rules constantly. Meanwhile, Amazon's policy of burning through its workforce and maintaining massive turnover rates has continued throughout the pandemic.

Commons areas are as packed as ever with people. The social distancing teams have been disbanded. Now, the only time Amazon slows down its operations is when it has to fix machines or belts – never to sanitize and deep-clean for safety.

When workers suddenly get sick and lose their lives, Amazon does all it can to bury any real investigation into what happened. We demand that all such information be published as an elementary public safety measure. In particular, we reiterate our demand that Amazon disclose all information related to workplace contacts and infections at the DDC3 warehouse in Northern Virginia, where Poushawn Brown worked as a COVID-19 tester before mysteriously passing away in her sleep.

Enough is enough!

Inconsistencies aside, by backtracking on its mask policies, Amazon is acknowledging the real danger of the pandemic. We, the Baltimore Amazon Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee, once again put forward our own demands, which are necessary to defend the health and lives of our coworkers. As we said back in our June statement calling for all Amazonians to continue observing social distancing wherever possible, "It is about time we laid down a few ground rules of our own."

Amazon is powerful only because of our labor. We therefore demand the provision of resources required to ensure safety during the pandemic for frontline workers such as ourselves.

Specifically, we demand:

- A genuine system of testing and contract tracing within Amazon's facilities. Workers must know, in real time, the number of cases, the department, and the shift time in which a COVID-19 case has been detected. All workers known to have been in proximity to infected individuals must be allowed to quarantine for two weeks with full pay and health benefits.

- Workers unwilling to risk themselves amid the pandemic must be given paid time off with no threat of termination. Workers previously terminated for protesting and resisting Amazon's abuses must be offered reinstatement at the same wage they received prior to being fired.

- Accessible, reliable and safe testing for all employees. Workers must be given access to a testing system designed by medical experts that is administered in a safe and socially distanced manner. These tests should be overseen and administered by medical professionals with the required background training and experience in their fields.

- Closure of facilities for necessary cleaning. If an outbreak is detected at a fulfillment center, it must be closed for at least two days and given deep cleaning with industrial grade chemicals that have the approval of a public health specialist. Likewise, break rooms must be properly social-distanced and cleaned at regular intervals. This must be done with no loss of pay for hourly workers affected.

- An end to abusive speed-up. The rate system in Amazon already leads to abuse, termination, and injury on a regular basis. Amid the pandemic, the effort to drive workers to the breaking point acquires a homicidal character. Workers must be given extended break periods at the end of each hour in order to maintain their health and safety. "Time Off Task" (TOT) tracking and other forms of harassment must be abolished.

- Immediate reinstatement of hazard pay with retroactive pay increases. In May 2020, Amazon ended its \$2 hazard pay increases as the pandemic was still spreading. Based on its level of profit, Amazon could more or less quadruple this hazard pay and still make money.

In addition, we renew our calls for solidarity with teachers and parents. We call on workers to join us and the growing network of rank-and-file committees at factories and schools across the country and the world to prepare a political general strike against the criminally insane reopening of classrooms as the Delta variant spreads. Children are not frontline workers and there is no reason to place them into conditions with even less protections than we have!

The dangerous reopening of schools is not being done out of concern for students' health and wellbeing, but to return parents to the workforce so employers can continue living high off the hog as the stock market soars and portfolio values rise. Amazon workers are parents themselves and at

risk from spread of the virus in the workplace already. We do not need another door through which the virus can enter our homes by sending children back to overcrowded, poorly ventilated and dilapidated school buildings.

Additionally, children 12 and under are not eligible for vaccination yet, putting themselves at greater danger of serious infection and disease.

We cannot put our faith in trade union organizations such as the Retail, Warehouse and Department Store Union (RWDSU) or the Teamsters, which are trying to organize Amazon workers in different locations this year. These corporatist groups have failed to lead any worker struggles during the pandemic or oppose the catastrophically premature reopening of non-essential businesses. Significantly, the RWDSU did not raise any demands relating to COVID-19 or anything else during its unsuccessful bid to gain recognition at the Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama earlier this year.

In raising our demands for these protections, we are not appealing to the billionaires running these corporations or their hired spokespeople in the Democratic and Republican parties, none of whom will listen to us. Workers, it is up to us to bring our voices to bear to stop this pandemic and the capitalist system driving mass death and suffering. We must form our own independent, democratically run rank-and-file organizations and affiliate them with one another in a broad network that is international in its scope to fight these policies.

To learn more about the Baltimore Amazon Rank-and-File Safety Committee or about establishing a rank-and-file committee in your own place of work, contact us online at get in touch with *World Socialist Web Site* and the *International Amazon Workers Voice*.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact