

COVID-19 outbreak at Amazon warehouse in Oregon infects 345 workers

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The Oregon Health Authority (OHA) reported 345 cases of COVID-19 at Amazon's Troutdale facility since May, making the Amazon PDX9 Fulfillment Center the workplace with the highest number of cases in the state. This follows a previous outbreak with over 100 cases at the same facility last December, bringing the total number of reported cases at PDX9 to at least 500 since the pandemic began.

The case numbers surpass those even at overwhelmed medical centers like Salem Hospital that has seen 299 reported cases since May, Asante Rogue Regional Medical Center with 108 cases since July, and even skilled nursing facilities. The Amazon Aumsville facility in Salem, Oregon sits at third place on the workplace outbreak list, with 185 cases since May.

The weekly outbreak reports demonstrate that Amazon and other warehouses, distribution centers, hospitals and K-12 schools are major vectors of transmission, as employees are forced to work in unsafe conditions where the Delta variant is spreading like wildfire.

OHA dispatched a bulletin on August 26 reporting 2,057 new COVID-19 cases and 9 new deaths, which brings Oregon's total confirmed coronavirus cases to 265,210 and the death toll to 3,095. The state is currently experiencing the largest number of cases and hospitalizations of any time during the pandemic. Hospitals across the state are completely overwhelmed without enough intensive care unit (ICU) beds to treat every patient who needs one. Doctors and nurses must make extremely difficult choices about who is eligible to receive life-saving treatment. This is hitting rural areas like Southern Oregon particularly hard that have low vaccination rates and underfunded health care facilities.

The Amazon Troutdale warehouse, which in 2019

and employed 2,000 workers, was already infamous for being one of Amazon's most dangerous facilities. In 2019, the *Portland Mercury* newspaper reported on PDX9's records saying, "26 out of every 100 workers at PDX9 sustained an injury in 2018."

As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported in December last year, Amazon made PDX9 workers sign non-disclosure agreements during its massive COVID-19 outbreak. These agreements subject workers to civil liability if they disclose "proprietary or confidential information of Amazon in whatever form, tangible or intangible, whether or not marked or otherwise designated as confidential, that is not otherwise generally known to the public, relating or pertaining to Amazon's business, projects, products, customers, suppliers, inventions, or trade secrets."

These NDAs have helped Amazon to conceal the severity of coronavirus infections among its workforce because any worker who brings outbreak information to the public could face an expensive lawsuit. This information is often hidden from the workers themselves, with management referencing privacy laws to justify not sharing infection information with workers in order to avoid any potential disruptions to its operations.

As has been the case across the US, Amazon has been relaxing mask requirements and COVID workplace rules in the past few months just as the Delta variant spread rapidly. At the end of July, Amazon shut down their free on-site testing, ended temperature checks at the entrances to its fulfillment centers, disbanded its social distancing enforcement crews and stopped requiring masks for unvaccinated workers.

In February, Amazon released statistics that said that it spent \$11.5 billion on COVID-19-related costs in 2020. Amazon spokesperson Maria Boschetti said in an

email statement, “As our employees and communities continue to get vaccinated and health authorities evolve guidance, we are continuously evaluating the temporary measures we implemented in response to COVID-19 and making adjustments in alignment with public health authority guidance. As a result, we will begin ramping down our U.S. testing operations by July 30, 2021.” She continued, “[Amazon would] always align our safety protocols with updated guidance from the CDC and other public health officials.”

Boschetti revealed that Amazon was putting the burden on workers by recommending vaccination with few other workplace protections. Amazon reversed its position on masks in early August, requiring them again for all employees regardless of vaccine status. However, proper masking is only one component of the comprehensive mitigation strategies needed to keep essential workers safe on the job, and by itself does not stop the spread of the virus.

Amazon has enjoyed a massive increase in profits during the pandemic, due to increased sales during the pandemic as customers stayed away from in-person shopping. In the second quarter of 2021, Amazon grew its total sales by a whopping 27 percent to \$113.1 billion and increased its profits by about 50 percent to \$7.8 billion. Its share price grew by 87 percent between January 2020 and March 2021, and Jeff Bezos’ personal wealth grew by nearly two-thirds, reaching a staggering \$195 billion.

Along with increased online ordering by customers, Amazon has ramped up the exploitation of its workers through the use of surveillance and automated efficiency algorithms. Cameras watch drivers’ and workers’ every move, and electronic devices control worker speed and even which musculoskeletal group a worker uses on a given day.

Anger is rising as warehouse workers and drivers realize the dangers they face from lack of adequate safeguards to protect them from COVID-19 and work injuries while management suppresses lifesaving information and Jeff Bezos soars into space on board his rocket. Apparently Bezos saw no irony in the fact that this trip was financed off the sweat and blood of his workers, declaring at his post-launch briefing, “I want to thank every Amazon employee, and every Amazon customer, because you guys paid for all this ... thank you from the bottom of my heart very much.”

Thanks indeed!

The conditions at Amazon illustrate more than ever the need to build rank-and-file safety committees to organize Amazon workers in the defense of their own safety and democratic rights. Through these committees, workers can call for strict testing and contact tracing, transparent reporting, and 48-hour shutdowns when viral spread occurs at their site.

In carrying out their fight, Amazon workers join the growing network of autoworkers, teachers, nurses, and other workers in a collective struggle to raise their own demands for better conditions. This struggle requires opposition to the corporations, political establishment, and pro-capitalist trade unions, all of which have defended the reckless policies that have led to nearly 700,000 COVID-19 deaths in the US alone.

It is possible to mobilize the resources of society to successfully eradicate the virus, using a combination of vaccines and public health measures known to be effective in fighting pandemics, such as short-term lockdowns, rigorous testing and contact tracing, ventilation, and masks. However, the ruling class has proven its unwillingness to carry out these life-saving measures, which would impede upon their urgent campaign to fully reopen the economy and send all workers back into facilities to generate record profits.

Only the working class has the power to change the course of the pandemic through an active struggle to assert that saving human lives must take priority over the profit mania of billionaires like Bezos. We urge workers at PDX9 across the US and internationally to contact the *International Amazon Workers Voice* to share your experiences, get assistance in forming rank-and-file committees, and join the fight for socialism.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact