

Amazon safety team member in Washington state loses his life to COVID-19

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On Wednesday, September 1, Jeff Linnell, a 51-year-old employee at Amazon's BFI4 warehouse in Kent, Washington, in the Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue metropolitan region died of COVID-19. Linnell is remembered by his wife of 24 years, along with family and friends as a "big jokester" with "bad jokes and a big heart."

According to a GoFundMe page set up to assist in funeral costs, Linnell was a "soulmate" to his wife. "I met Jeff not long after him starting at the same company his wife and I worked at," says the introduction. "He could always make you laugh with his bad jokes and big heart. ... Jeff lost his battle after 3 weeks in the ICU trying to fight off this horrible virus."

Linnell was a "safety ambassador" at the BFI4 facility. The fulfillment center is referred to in the *Seattle Times* as the "closest of its kind to Amazon's Seattle headquarters" and "a proving ground for several new safety measures implemented by the commerce giant, including coronavirus testing."

Amazon also used BFI4 as a backdrop for several propaganda films that it distributed to local media stations last spring in order to bolster the company's public safety image. One of the pitches the company fed to local news anchors to repeat on-air was, "The company [Amazon] is keeping its employees safe and healthy."

Early on in the pandemic, Amazon was compelled to introduce a number of protective measures and concessions to its workforce in order to keep operations going. A *New York Times* investigation last June described, "Semi trucks [sitting] at warehouses around the country, without enough workers to unload them. ... Warehouse laborers were not showing up" as news of cases spread throughout the company.

Some of the limited measures started at BFI4

included temperature checks, social distancing rules, better cleaning, contact tracing, testing and mask mandates. In most cases, these precautions have all been eliminated within Amazon, following the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s directives that allowed public health and safety measures, such as masking, to be discarded.

Amazon was again compelled to introduce masking requirements in its warehouses last month as infections increased in the United States due to the rapid spread of the Delta variant. According to the *New York Times* COVID Tracker, cases in Washington state have reached levels near the peak of the wave which hit the US last winter, when a majority of the population was unvaccinated.

Linnell's death—a terrible loss to friends, family and co-workers—is a further demonstration of Amazon's callous attitude toward the safety and well-being of its employees. Despite the persistent danger posed by COVID-19, the company has dismantled other health and safety measures, such as its self-testing centers. Other measures, such as the anonymous COVID-19 text "alert" system which informs workers when a person at their facility tests positive, do not give workers details about cases in the facility and are largely useless for public safety purposes.

Workers reacted to Linnell's death with expressions of sympathy to his family and co-workers, as well as anger directed against Amazon management. "We send our most sincere condolences to the family, friends and coworkers of our fellow Amazonian," wrote Marc, a leading member of the Baltimore Amazon Workers Rank-and-File Committee that was formed last year among Amazon workers to oppose the exploitative policies of their employer amid the pandemic. Marc demanded Amazon "create better measures to keep us

all safe.”

Last month, the committee issued a statement (“Amazon rank and file respond to company decision to bring back masks as COVID-19 surges: Too little, too late”), which asked: “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 does not publicly report its daily case numbers at its locations.” It is now clear that Linnell was one of those cases.

The Baltimore Amazon Worker Rank-and-File Committee has raised a series of safety demands, including:

- A **genuine** system of contact tracing within Amazon’s facilities.
- Paid time off with no threat of termination for workers unwilling to risk themselves during the pandemic. The rehiring at the same wage or higher for workers previously terminated for protesting and resisting Amazon’s abuses.
- Accessible, reliable and safe testing and vaccinations for all employees who desire them. These items 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 deep-cleaned with no loss of pay to the workers affected.
- An end to abusive speedup. Extended break periods at the end of every hour to maintain 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.

The committee has also demanded Amazon provide all information in its possession about the death of fellow Amazonian Poushawn Brown, as well as “[f]ull financial and medical support for the Brown family, paid for by Amazon.” Brown mysteriously passed away in her sleep after working a shift in Amazon’s COVID-19 testing department at the DDC3 facility in Northern Virginia.

Company executives have frequently stated that

warehouses are safe from COVID-19. When asked by a reporter on CBS’s “60 Minutes” if Amazon was free of blame for any cases “spreading ... in your facilities,” operations executive Dave Clark replied, “That’s correct.”

However, in the spring of this year, Amazon was ordered to close fulfillment centers in Ontario, Canada following a rise in COVID-19 cases inside the facility. Closer to BFI4, the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) reported 345 cases of COVID-19 at Amazon’s Troutdale facility since May, which made the Troutdale PDX9 fulfillment center the workplace with the highest number of cases in the state.



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