

“He was always smiling”

## Coworkers remember Amazon safety team member who died of COVID-19

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On September 11, the WSWS *International Amazon Workers Voice* reported that Jeff Linnell, a 51-year-old safety ambassador who had worked at Amazon’s BFI4 fulfillment center in Kent, Washington, in the Seattle metropolitan region, had lost his life to COVID-19.

Linnell was working at the facility in August during the time when he caught the virus. After spending weeks on a ventilator, he succumbed to the deadly disease, which has taken the lives of at least 670,000 others across the United States and 4 million people internationally.

Following the publication of the article, several of Linnell’s co-workers and friends contacted the IAWV to talk about what happened. Several of them have taken up a GoFundMe collection to support Linnell’s wife, who has been forced to shoulder the cost of her husband’s burial. His co-workers asked that their names be changed in this article to avoid management retaliation.

Jordan stressed Linnell’s dedication to his work but insisted that he “didn’t catch [COVID-19] anywhere else but Amazon.” He based this conclusion on his knowledge of Linnell’s position on the safety team and the nature of his work.

According to an *Indeed.com* description, safety ambassador jobs require “lots of hours on your feet.” According to Jordan, this required Linnell to “be around lots of people” and make sure they were masking and keeping six feet of distance from each other. The *Indeed.com* description adds that safety ambassadors have to deal with “management not really communicating with employees.”

Masking guidelines at Amazon were eliminated in May of this year and only re-imposed on Monday,

August 9. This coincided with the time frame that Linnell first became ill with COVID-19.

“He was a firefighter before working at Amazon. He was always very concerned with safety,” said Jordan. Linnell’s concern for safety was heightened by the fact that he and his wife of 24 years both worked at BFI4, and Linnell personally had a weakened immune system.

Amelia stated that she had first heard about what happened from Linnell’s wife. “She messaged me, asking if I could talk. I was at work. When I found out, I immediately had to stop working and take a minute.” Amelia said that she could tell by her friend’s voice that the full weight of her loss had not yet sunk in. “She wasn’t crying or anything, I remember.”

Co-workers were taken aback by how quickly the disease had taken him. “I remember having heard that he was in an intensive care unit but that things were starting to improve. Then, all of a sudden, things took a wrong turn,” one worker said.

Linnell was very popular at the BFI4 warehouse. “*Everyone* knew him. He was like the face of the building. He was always smiling,” said James, who said that he had first met Linnell two years earlier, when the latter first came to work at BFI4.

Others shared similar memories of him: “He was always so sweet. He made you want to come to work. He had these gag jokes. I mean, the guy would always make *steak* for lunch. It was like he had a poor sense of humor, except it was still funny.” According to his co-worker, Linnell would “give you the shirt off of his back” if he felt that it would help.

Linnell had spent at least three weeks in the ICU before his death on September 1. This would mean that

the period in which he caught COVID-19 coincided with an explosion of cases across the country.

On August 11, exactly three weeks before he passed away, the *World Socialist Web Site* noted that “there are almost 69,000 COVID-19 patients hospitalized in the US, an increase of 2,591 from the week before.” The article continued, “16,828 are in ICUs. Every state except Utah has seen a rise in new cases.”

At the same time, several workers expressed concern about the danger of retaliation at Amazon for workers who raised safety concerns. Referring to management, one worker told the IAWV, “If anyone says anything [about Amazon], they will go after them.”

On August 16, the Baltimore Amazon Workers Rank-and-File Committee issued detailed safety-related demands, such as genuine contact tracing, accessible and frequent testing, the closure of facilities for necessary cleaning and paid time off without the threat of termination for workers who are unwilling to risk their health during the pandemic.

The committee called the belated return of mask requirements “too little, too late.” The committee warned: “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.”

As in the case of the death of Poushawn Brown, who worked in the COVID-19 testing department of an Amazon facility in Virginia, the loss of Jeff Linnell contrasts with the company’s unwillingness to implement the scientifically necessary safety measures to eradicate the deadly virus in the workplace.

There is more than enough money for the safety measures necessary to protect the health and lives of all Amazon workers. According to a study carried out last year by the Brookings Institute based on reported earnings, Amazon and other major retailers “could have quadrupled the hazard pay they gave their frontline workers and still earned more profit than the previous year.”



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