Amazon once again abandons mask requirements

Claude Delphian
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On Friday, October 29, Amazon announced that fully vaccinated workers may go without face masks. An internal memo was sent to workers by text, stating, “We are pleased to announce that effective November 2, fully vaccinated employees who have loaded their vaccination information into A to Z [Amazon’s scheduling and informational app for workers] will have the option to not wear a face covering at Amazon U.S. Operations sites, unless otherwise mandated by federal, state, or local regulations.”

Amazon’s latest relaxation of mask requirements comes as 75,000 people are being infected daily with COVID-19 in the United States. In comparison, the last time Amazon dropped mask requirements on May 24, 2021, the rate of new daily cases in the United States was about 23,000, which underscores the recklessness of the current policy.

The Amazon text continued, “As the scientific community has learned more about the benefits of COVID-19 vaccination, it is now clear that for most people who are fully vaccinated, the risk of contracting and transmitting coronavirus is extremely low.”

While vaccines have been shown to reduce the symptoms and the rates of hospitalization among those who have contracted the virus, vaccination alone cannot eliminate the virus. Vaccination is but one tool in an array of public health measures (such as testing, contact tracing, and the closure of nonessential businesses and schools) that must be enacted to end the pandemic.

Downplaying the threat of the pandemic is useful to corporate CEOs, who have massively increased their own wealth since it began. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos increased his own personal fortune by about $80 billion to a total of over $200 billion during the pandemic. Meanwhile, many of his employees became sick, and others died. In October 2020, Amazon announced that over 20,000 Amazon workers had been infected with COVID-19, a number that is now certainly out of date. Amazon has rarely released information about infections and deaths in its workplaces, so it is uncertain exactly how large those numbers are today.

In May, Amazon dropped its mask requirements following new guidance from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) that said 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.” The *World Socialist Web Site* stated at the time that the CDC guidance reflected a “political, not a scientific, decision” to promote business interests by removing impediments to profits.

Responding to this first abandonment of COVID-19 face mask protocols, the Baltimore Amazon Workers Rank-and-File Committee released a statement saying that the new 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.” The committee went on to warn that “there is no reason to believe that the pandemic has ended.” This warning was proven correct two months later when, on August 9, Amazon responded to a spike in the number of cases by reinstating the mask requirements.

Today, Amazon has largely abandoned staggered shifts, the prohibition on stand-up meetings and other protective measures that it had enacted earlier in the pandemic. The company’s decision not to require unvaccinated workers to wear masks will make conditions more dangerous and have disastrous consequences.

The company is confronting labor shortages and has already expressed concerns that it is burning through its workforce with high turnover. Amazon is seeking ways

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to lure workers to work for them during the holidays, the busiest time for logistics, warehouses and fulfillment centers. Amazon has a turnover of almost 3 percent of its entire workforce every week and a staggering 150 percent of its workforce every year. "That rate," according to a *New York Times* article on the subject, entitled, "The Amazon That Customers Don't See," is "almost double that of the retail and logistics industries [and] has made some executives worry about running out of workers across America."

Amazon in September gave meager starting pay raises from $15 to $18 per hour that don't address the cost of living in the cities in which the company operates its warehouses. Economic necessity, however, will spur many workers to take this incentive, which will put their safety at risk and further fuel the spread of COVID-19.

Amazon has earned notoriety for its poor safety record. In 2020, Amazon reported a rate of 6.5 injuries for every 100 "full-time equivalent" workers in their warehouses. In October 2020, OSHA cited Amazon for failing to provide adequate health and safety training at two California facilities .

The company's record during the pandemic has been abysmal. Amazon was ordered to close a facility near Toronto, Canada, for two weeks in March due to significantly rising COVID-19 infections, even though infection rates had been decreasing in the surrounding Peel region for weeks. In Oregon, one of the worst outbreaks of COVID-19 occurred at Amazon's Troutdale facility, which has reported 345 cases since May, bringing that facility's total to at least 500 cases since the pandemic began. Amazon Troutdale saw case numbers surpassing even those at overwhelmed medical centers such as Salem Hospital, which had seen 299 cases since May.

At every point, the policy of the corporations and their political servants has been to put profit interests above saving lives, while vilifying scientists whose data contradicts and comes into conflict with the corporate agenda. After the complete botching of the health response by political authorities for almost two years now, including uneven and contradictory response measures, some workers have adopted a cynical attitude toward public health measures, and might be attracted to the idea of working for Amazon without masks. Thousands of maskless workers could be mingling in close spaces this holiday season as a result.

The disregard for workers' health and safety means workers must organize to protect themselves. The *World Socialist Web Site* urges Amazon workers to follow the example of the Amazon workers in Baltimore and set up rank-and-file safety committees. These committees must democratically map out demands for safe working conditions and fight to unite with Amazon workers in the US and globally to insist that lives be put ahead of corporate profits.

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