

Amazon cuts COVID-19 quarantines in half to keep workers on the job

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In a text message sent to employees on January 7, Amazon announced it was cutting paid time off for people infected with COVID-19 from two weeks to one week, or a maximum of 40 working hours. The policy is effective immediately.

The text message, delivered on Amazon's A-to-Z scheduling app, makes the demonstrably false claim that vaccination alone is enough to prevent the spread of severe infection, stating the risk is "significantly decreased" among the vaccinated. Notably, in citing this justification, Amazon did not then insist that its employees must be vaccinated to be at work.

It states: "Throughout the past two years we have consistently based our response to the evolving COVID-19 pandemic on guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the advice of our own medical experts." According to the memorandum, Amazon was "updating" its "isolation and quarantine policy to one week."

The new guideline comes amid a record-breaking spread of COVID-19 in the population, with the United States reporting over a million cases on Tuesday. Hospitalizations have increased 82 percent over the last 2 weeks and deaths have increased by 40 percent.

The U.S. has recorded more than 60 million COVID-19 cases, and according to *New York Times* data, more than 837,000 deaths.

On December 27, the CDC cravenly bowed to the interests of corporations, announcing that it would cut recommended quarantine time in half, from 10 days to five for employees infected with COVID-19. At the time, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky stated that the shortening of recovery time was needed in order to "make sure there is a mechanism by which we can safely continue to keep society functioning while following the science," or in other words, to make sure

that mass infection does not interfere with the profit-making of corporate America.

The decision had come after the airline travel industry had lobbied the United States federal government for weeks. Massive outbreaks in the industry have led to the cancellation of thousands of flights over the last month and a half.

Commenting on the decision at the time, the *Miami Herald* said the updated guidelines are a result of a push from "some experts to shorten the isolation period" which "wasn't sustainable as it would strain the workforce in critical industries."

On Thursday, Chris Smalls, the leader of a group seeking to establish a union at the JFK8 fulfillment center in Staten Island, New York City, announced on Twitter that at least 10 percent of the warehouse was out with COVID-19. "This is a public health crisis [Amazon] hid cases from workers since 2020 the text they send to workers does not reflect the actual amount," he wrote. Last month, the New York state attorney ordered the JFK8 warehouse to increase its preventive measures against infection.

"I'm grateful that we at least are being given seven days [instead of the CDC's recommended five days]," said an Amazon worker from Baltimore to the *World Socialist Web Site*. "But who knows if that is a recommendation that is scientific or not. I honestly think they just set it at seven days because it is easier on Amazon's payroll."

An article in *Business Insider* detailed Amazon's drive to profit at all costs. It mentions an internal email sent by a warehouse manager during the December 2020 peak, who states, 'When I was hired, the term 'drinking from the fire hose' was the way it was described to all what it was like to work at Amazon.'

"This was not an accurate description at all," the

letter continues. “A better description would be something to the tune of drinking through the fire hose, underwater, while a group of people try to prevent you from coming up for air.”

“The incident gives a rare look into the grueling life of Amazon’s warehouse managers,” the article states, adding that these corporate “lieutenants” are “given a daily quota of handing out at least five ‘write-ups,’ a written warning given to associates who fail to adhere to work policies.”

Amazon burns through 3 percent of its workforce every week, or a 150 percent annual turnover rate in its workforce of close to two million workers. Some plants in rural communities have had to bus workers in from other areas.

The decision to cut isolation periods follows Walmart’s policy announced on January 5 that it would cut pandemic-related paid leave in half, according to CNBC. According to the report, Amazon and other companies have “repeatedly shifted their policies as the pandemic has lingered and new variants arise.”

Amazon’s latest policy change contradicts other public health guidelines. In December, the company reintroduced a mask policy in its warehouses. ‘In response to the rapid spread of the Covid-19 omicron variant in the U.S. and guidance from public health authorities and our own medical experts, face coverings are again required for everyone,’ an A-to-Z text declared.

This was one of many zigzags in policy. In May 2021, Amazon announced that workers were free to remove masks before bringing them back in August, and then again removing them in November. The company now again insists workers wear masks, yet insists on returning them to work after seven days of quarantine, during which many will still be infectious.

Amazon continues to conceal the number of infections at its US facilities. In October of 2020, Amazon released a report stating that 20,000 of its workers had tested positive—the last time Amazon has reported any figures publicly.

Meanwhile, Amazon’s profits are hitting record highs, with the latest figures showing profits of \$3.2 billion in the quarter ending in September 2021. The earnings were up 15 percent from the same period in 2020, which itself was a record-earning year for the company.

Amazon workers must resist the corporate-driven campaign to force them back to work before they have recovered from COVID-19. Workers must form rank-and-file committees, such as have been formed by Amazonians in Baltimore against the management’s efforts to expose them to the deadly disease in order to accumulate profit.

The committee is formed by and run by Amazon workers in order to protect their fellow Amazonians from the efforts to exploit them by management. It is independent from both the Democratic and Republican parties of big business and the established trade union bureaucracy, which itself is an arm of the corporations and has been essential in forcing workers back to work amid the pandemic.



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