

At least one in 10 workers out with COVID at Amazon's JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island

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A leaked internal document has revealed that a large portion of the workforce at Amazon's JFK8 warehouse on Staten Island in New York City were out due to COVID-19 last week. Of the 6,000 workers at the facility, the document lists 552 workers as being on "LeaveWithPay"—one week paid leave after testing positive for COVID-19—and 1,254 on unpaid "Leave," some of which may also be COVID-related. JFK8 is only one of four Amazon facilities in a larger Staten Island complex.

Last month, the New York state attorney general belatedly ordered the JFK8 warehouse to increase its preventive measures against infection, though this call has clearly proved to be wholly inadequate.

Amazon is notorious for having an extremely high turnover rate of 3 percent per week, or 156 percent annually, due to the hellish conditions. However, the raging pandemic is straining Amazon's ability to maintain a sufficient workforce. The document indicates that already more than 200 new warehouse employees have been hired since the beginning of this year alone.

Workers also report being subjected to mandatory overtime at the plant, presumably due to the staffing shortages. In response, the Amazon Labor Union (ALU), which is trying to unionize JFK8, tweeted, "They're now calling for mandatory overtime, increasing exposure for remaining healthy workers. The company sends out daily COVID-19 notifications that are intentionally misleading. Only dates that positive cases occurred are reported, and the company refuses to disclose the exact number of cases."

The ALU has recently made a second filing of a petition to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to schedule a representation election, this time only for the JFK8 warehouse as opposed to the entire complex,

which was included in the original filing. An earlier petition was rejected by the NLRB on the basis that it failed to meet the mandatory 30 percent threshold of signatures from the whole workforce. The ALU is set to have an NLRB hearing later this month on January 28.

Amazon is notorious for not providing data on the spread of COVID throughout its workforce to the public and only very limited data to its employees. Last November, the company settled a lawsuit brought by the California attorney general which charged it with concealing the number of COVID cases in its warehouses from its workers. The last time Amazon announced even the total number of infections in its US workforce was in October of 2020, when it was 20,000. The total has undoubtedly increased many times over since then.

Indeed, the figures indicated in the leaked document must be taken as a minimum, since it is likely that many Amazon workers feel compelled to come to work for economic reasons given the company's totally inadequate COVID paid-leave policy. It is well documented that individuals remain infectious beyond the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) newly recommended five-day quarantine period, and workers have reported extreme difficulties in getting approval from the company to qualify for paid leave.

Early in the pandemic, Amazon established on-site testing facilities, but these were eliminated last summer during the relative lull prior to the Delta wave. Workers have been left to get tested on their own. Mask mandates were relaxed at that time for those who were vaccinated, and other safety precautions were eliminated, with Amazon claiming that these moves were in compliance with changes in CDC guidance.

According to Amazon, nearly a third of the workforce for the whole Staten Island complex, including JFK8,

are not documented as having received even one dose of vaccine.

Amazon's profits, meanwhile, 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.

In order to combat the continued attacks on their working conditions and their safety, Amazon workers need independent, fighting organizations under their control. These organizations must strongly oppose the sickening pandemic profiteering taking place under capitalism and be oriented towards a socialist perspective based on the urgent needs of the entire working class, not what the capitalist class is willing to part with.

The ALU has close connections to and is oriented toward the pro-corporate and pro-capitalist AFL-CIO unions and the Democratic Party, which seek to block the growing upsurge in the working class and have forced workers back to unsafe jobs amid the Omicron surge.

Amazon workers in New York, as well as across the US and internationally, should follow the example of the Baltimore Amazon Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which formed last year against Amazon's efforts to expose them to the deadly disease in order to accumulate profit. These independent rank-and-file committees must link up and unify across workplaces, industries and borders, and fight for a scientific strategy of global elimination of COVID-19 and the rejection of capitalism's demand that private profit be prioritized before human life.



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