

# As Omicron rages through US workplaces, 8.8 million workers were off sick in early January

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According to US Census Bureau data, 8.8 million American workers were off work, sick or taking care of ill family members in early January, the highest number since the start of the pandemic. The rise in sickness takes place under conditions in which infection and death are surging due to the highly contagious Omicron variant and virtually all mitigation measures, besides vaccination, have been removed.

The almost 9 million workers off sick amount to 6 percent of the US workforce. Another 3.2 million workers reported they were not working due to fear of contracting or spreading COVID-19, an increase of 25 percent from early December. The numbers represent a threefold increase since the arrival of Omicron.

The brutal decision by the US government and governments in Western Europe and internationally to allow the virus to spread, while abandoning most efforts to contain the disease, is having a devastating impact on broad masses of people, far beyond the daily toll of deaths and hospitalization. In the United States, which has a far more primitive level of social benefits than most European nations, the impact has been particularly dire.

COVID deaths across the US continue to rise. A researcher at Pennsylvania State University, who co-leads a team that looks at pandemic models, predicts 1.5 million Americans will be hospitalized and between 191,000 and 305,000 will die in the period between mid-December and mid-March.

The policy of allowing the virus to spread unchecked through workplaces, schools and communities is not only spreading death, but producing an economic catastrophe for millions of working-class families, who in many cases do not have paid sick days or access to health insurance coverage. Those not reporting to work due to sickness only represent a portion of those infected, as the lack of sick pay and highly restrictive sick leave policies are forcing unknown millions of infected workers to stay on the job. The mass sickness has left many businesses short-staffed, forcing those remaining to work ever longer hours, like the 12-hour days that are routine in the auto factories and oil refineries,

in the midst of a deadly pandemic.

A recent decision by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reduced the mandatory quarantine time for exposed or infected individuals from 10 to five days. After the CDC decision several large employers, including Walmart and Amazon, reduced the number of guaranteed paid sick days available to their employees.

Congress mandated expanded sick leave at the start of the pandemic, but that expired December 31, 2020. The paid family and medical leave requirement in the Biden administration's Build Back Better social spending bill appears dead in the water.

A survey conducted by Harvard University's Shift Project last fall found that 65 percent of respondents reported they went to work despite being sick. That is a smaller figure than the 85 percent who said they went to work sick prior to the pandemic.

According to the US Census Bureau, 85 percent of civilian workers had at least one paid sick day available in March 2021. However, the availability of sick pay varies widely, with the lowest-paid workers having the least access. Among the bottom 10 percent of wage earners, only 47 percent get paid sick time. Further, many companies require workers to use paid leave days to cover time off for sickness, reducing the total vacation time they have available.

Low-paid workers are often in those occupations involving direct contact with the public, such as hotel and restaurant workers, increasing their danger of exposure and transmitting the disease.

Even if workers have paid sick time, they often face a Byzantine nightmare trying to collect. The Detroit automakers will only pay workers who quarantine after exhibiting symptoms or being exposed to an employee with COVID-19 unless they test positive for the disease. Even then it may take weeks to get paid. This further encourages workers to ignore symptoms and report to the jobs sick, leading to more infections, hospitalizations and death.

A Ford autoworker from Ohio said if a worker has symptoms or is exposed, "You go get a COVID test; you

only get paid if it turns out to be positive. Pay has been received within a couple weeks. The problem is, say I have COVID, Ford hasn't been doing a good job contact tracing. They used to do a comprehensive job, but not anymore."

A US Postal Service worker in St. Paul, Minnesota, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that more than 100 out of 500 workers at his facility are currently out sick or self-isolating due to COVID-19.

"The COVID paid leave policy ended around September 2021, anyone who tests positive has to use their own annual/sick leave or leave without pay. They say they are doing contact tracing but I find that hard to believe.

"It's only compounding an already dangerous situation; some people are choosing to come to work despite being sick because they have no annual/sick leave. Then add the fact that management isn't enforcing the mask policy. It's no surprise so many people are out at our facility. The union office is conveniently located inside our facility. These union stewards are fully aware of the situation unfolding. Yet all I'm hearing are crickets from that office, their indifference towards what's happening is on full display."

A college instructor from Pennsylvania remarked, "With COVID, even though I could teach on Zoom from home, I'm being forced to use up all my sick time and cancel classes, thus denying students the education they paid for, and using up a sick day. They're draining your sick days, which is a reduction in their liabilities.

"They're screwing those who don't have any sick days and turning upside down and emptying the pockets of those who do."

The increase in sickness has led to a rising number of new unemployment claims, which rose to 286,000 last week, up 55,000 from the week prior. That was the highest weekly number of new claims since October. The sharp rise is despite the Biden administration's efforts to force workers back to work by allowing virtually all pandemic-related financial support, including expanded unemployment benefits, eviction bans and the child tax credit, to expire. Asked if there would be any further relief for workers impacted by COVID-19, an unnamed senior Biden administration official earlier this month told CNN, "[W]e are not going to write checks to incentivize people to sit at home..."

Economists expressed concern that the spread of sickness was deepening the labor shortage, that is, further shrinking the number of workers able and willing to risk their health during a pandemic for poverty level wages. A record 4.5 million workers quit their jobs in November. Diane Swonk, economist at accounting firm Grant Thornton, cited by the *Washington Post*, said, "Unfortunately, the biggest issue about Omicron is it's no longer just fear of contagion and

aversion to in-person activity, but it's actually causing acute labor shortages from the sheer number of people who are out sick."

Delta Airlines reported that 8,000 employees had contracted COVID-19 over the last four weeks, 10 percent of its workforce. Cases are surging in auto plants, although the true number of infections is not known since the auto companies with the support of the United Auto Workers cover up infections and deaths. Hundreds are out sick at Warren Truck and Sterling Heights Assembly, major Detroit area Stellantis plants.

Faced with a severe shortage of staff, health care providers are resorting to desperate measures that will only ensure the more rapid spread of the disease. The state of California is requiring health care workers who test positive for COVID, but are asymptomatic, to report to work without any quarantine or repeat COVID-19 testing. At MultiCare Health Systems in Washington state, a hospital clinic and urgent care network, COVID-infected health care workers have been told to resume work even if they are symptomatic.

The brutal prioritization of profits over lives by the Biden administration, backed by the entire political establishment, is an indictment of the capitalist system. Their "herd immunity" policy is dictated, not by medical science and epidemiology, but the needs of Wall Street.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party call for the shutdown of nonessential production and in-person learning, with full compensation to laid-off workers and small business owners, as part of a public health campaign to eliminate and eradicate COVID. This requires the independent mobilization and initiative of the working class outside the framework of the corporatist unions and the capitalist political parties.



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