

Amazon announces end of mask requirements, while COVID-19 remains widespread in warehouses

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20 February 2022

Are you an Amazon worker? Let us know what you think of Amazon's rollback of COVID-19 safety measures and conditions at your workplace. Email us at iawv@wsws.org. Workers' identities will be kept confidential.

On Thursday, February 10, Amazon.com Inc. announced that it would again be eliminating its mask requirement in its warehouses.

The message, sent to its roughly 1.1 million US employees via its scheduling and workflow app A-to-Z, states that due to a “sharp decline in COVID-19 cases across the country over the past weeks,” it is now possible for fully vaccinated employees to go without a facemask “where permitted by local regulations.” The text informed workers that the new policy would begin the very next day, February 11.

The decision to alter the company's policy on masks comes as over 2,000 Americans on average still continue to die every day from COVID-19. Despite this, the American capitalist press and political establishment have mobilized a campaign to falsely declare that COVID-19 has become “endemic” and no longer poses a serious threat to the public. This language is reflected in the text sent to Amazon workers, which states that the current status of the virus means “we can return to a normal path of operations.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has previously explained, the efforts to distort the meaning of the term endemic “have absolutely nothing to do with scientific fact, let alone public health.” In reality, the “new normal” being advocated by the ruling class and its political representatives could entail 200,000-250,000 deaths due to COVID -19 annually, according to immunologist Kristian Andersen.

“It's horrible right now,” said an Amazon worker in Baltimore to the *WSWS International Amazon Workers Voice*. “There are so many people out [sick] right now,” he explained. “COVID has crippled my building.” The worker said that with so many workers calling out sick, whole departments needed to be given voluntary time off. Workers in touch with the IAWV have confirmed that they receive dozens of text messages daily informing them that another positive case has been found.

Amazon's change to its masking policy comes as the official caseload of COVID-19 remains as high as it was in the fall. In May 2021, the first time Amazon announced that it would be ending mask requirements, COVID-19 cases stood at around 30,000 daily. Deaths were around 500 a day. Notably, this guidance came before the onset of the Delta variant in the US, which was significantly more deadly. Amazon brought masks back in August 2021 only to drop them again in November. At that time, COVID-19 cases stood at around 75,000 a day, with deaths around 1,500.

Official COVID-19 cases now stand at about 100,000 a day—widely acknowledged to be a significant undercount due to inadequate testing and case reporting—with a daily death toll of around 2,200. On August 6, when Amazon first announced it was bringing masks back, the daily death toll was around 600. This is nearly four times less than it is now as the company announces it is on a “path to normal.”

And while official daily reported cases have fallen in recent weeks, the number of active COVID-19 infections in the US remains near its all-time record, according to Worldometer's coronavirus dashboard. Amazon is thus ending its mask policy while

substantial numbers of workers and their family members remain both infected and infectious with the virus.

Other large retailers have made similar announcements. On Friday, February 11, Walmart, the second largest retailer, announced it too would drop masking requirements for its vaccinated workers “effective immediately.” The company will also end its pandemic sick pay program at the end of March.

For its part, Amazon recently cut in half the number of days in which workers can receive paid time off if they test positive for COVID-19. The move was driven by the company’s desire to keep workers on the job and producing profits, despite the devastating spread of the Omicron variant. The wind down of paid leave for COVID-19 infections was itself the intended outcome of the politically motivated decision by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in December to cut recommended quarantine time from 10 days to 5.

A recent article in *Forbes* explains the real logic behind the massive corporate retailers’ decisions to end and shorten paid time off during the pandemic. The article (“Walmart, Amazon Say Covid Sick Leave Has Cost Them A Fortune”) states that Amazon has “ended up paying a lot more in overtime to cover shifts left unfilled because of another employee’s sick leave, meaning it was paying two or three times for an hour of labor.”

Speaking in October to a tech industry audience, Amazon CEO Andy Jassy cynically complained that the “process around people being able to request short and long term leave” at the company “didn’t work the way we wanted it to work.’

This comment came in response to news about workers being denied time off for COVID-19. Rather than fixing this process to the benefit of its workers, Amazon has “fixed” the process to the benefit of the company by simply making it policy to not allow paid time off.

As to Amazon’s claim that it has spent “a fortune” on its workers, the corporation has hid the total number of COVID-19 cases found at its warehouses, leaving many workers to become infected without even knowing whom they may have come into contact with. Amazon has only once publicly reported the total number of COVID-19 infections detected in its facilities in October 2020, nearly 18 months ago.

Based on the little information that has been reported, however, COVID-19 has continued to have a horrific impact on Amazon workers in recent months. At just one warehouse in California, the Rialto LGB7 facility, over 1,000 COVID-19 cases were recorded by management between November 12, 2021, and January 29, 2022, according to a recent investigative report by The Markup.

Amazon’s intense exploitation of its workforce has contributed to the colossal growth of wealth among its top executives, including former CEO Jeff Bezos (net worth \$200 billion) and CEO Andy Jassy (\$280 million). According to a study conducted in late 2020, “Amazon and Walmart could have quadrupled the hazard pay they gave their frontline workers and still earned more profit than the previous year.”



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