

Report on California's Amazon warehouses reveals massive COVID-19 cover-up

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A report published last month in the tech publication *The Markup* exposed a massive cover-up of COVID-19 in Amazon warehouses during the Omicron surge of the pandemic.

The report is based on communications received by Amazon workers in California on the company's "A-to-Z" phone app. Amazon began issuing slightly more detailed text notifications to its California employees following a state complaint last November which claimed the company engaged in "unfair competition" by refusing to publish exact numbers of COVID-19 cases.

As of today, Amazon has only once publicly disclosed the total number of reported COVID-19 cases at its nearly 600 United States warehouses. That report from October 2020 admitted to 20,000 cases. There is no doubt that amount has been eclipsed many times over in the year and a half since.

The Markup's report states "hundreds of workers ... tested positive for COVID-19 over the past two and a half months" at a single warehouse in Rialto. In early December, the warehouse, LGB7, reported around four cases a day. "By mid-January, it was 45 [cases a day]," the report notes.

Likewise, company texts from a Stockton warehouse which employed 2,700 found that in a roughly two month period, a worker was "alerted ... to 832 COVID cases among employees." This equates to roughly a third of the warehouse's workforce falling ill.

The scale of infections at Amazon warehouses nationwide was likely so great that it threatened Amazon's operations during the vital holiday shipping season. *The Markup* writes that the rapid rise in cases at Amazon coincided with a company-wide effort to "roll back safety and sick leave protocols in its warehouses."

On January 7, the company announced through text

that it would cut in half its sick leave from two weeks to only seven days. The company sought to justify this on the grounds that dangers of infection from the Omicron variant had "significantly decreased."

Less than a month later, the company announced that it would again let vaccinated employees remove masks while in its warehouses. At the time, an Amazon worker from Baltimore told the *World Socialist Web Site* that "[t]here are so many people out [sick] right now... COVID has crippled my building."

Last month, Amazon announced that "only employees who have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and logged it on A to Z will be eligible to receive paid leave due to COVID-19." The company cites the free availability of vaccines as well as a \$40 bonus on offer to employees to justify its callous policy.

Amazon's push to end protections against infection at its facilities coincide with a larger effort by the US government and other corporations to abandon public health measures and normalize mass infection. In December, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention faced pressure from businesses to loosen public health guidelines to accommodate corporate demand to keep workers on the job during the holidays.

On December 27, the CDC caved to these demands, with director Rochelle Walensky declaring it was necessary to "make sure there is a mechanism by which we can safely continue to keep society functioning," cutting in half the required quarantine for infected workers' time from 10 days to only five, forcing many to return to work while still sick.

This has only accelerated, with the US government issuing guidance after guidance to minimize public awareness about the prevailing levels of mass infection and death still present.

At the state level, The Markup report notes that the pandemic overwhelmed state-based tracking systems that had previously been providing case numbers to the broader public. The nearby Oregon Health Authority became so swamped by COVID-19 cases that it was compelled to “reprioritize its outbreak response efforts to focus on ‘settings with the highest risk for severe disease, death and broad transmission.’”

This focus excluded Amazon warehouses from counts, even though “the two longest COVID workplace outbreaks that the state agency had tracked were in Amazon’s PDX7 and PDX9 warehouses.”

While California’s Democratic Party-led government asserts this company refusal gives it an unfair advantage, the policy is uniform throughout the United States. The Markup report notes, “Elsewhere in the country, workers are not necessarily told on a daily basis how many of their coworkers have contracted the virus.”

The Markup reports that in response to its inquiries, “Amazon didn’t respond to questions about how many of its workers nationwide have tested positive for COVID or why the company doesn’t provide daily case counts for all its warehouse workers.”

Throughout the pandemic, the company has consistently reported record-breaking profits throughout the pandemic. A report on its 2021 earnings last month noted that its “[n]et sales increased 22% to \$469.8 billion, compared with \$386.1 billion in 2020.”

“Given the extraordinary growth we saw in 2020 when customers predominantly stayed home,” stated CEO Andy Jassy in a company statement, “and the fact that we’ve continued to grow on top of that in 2021, our Retail teammates have effectively operated in peak mode for almost two years.”



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