

# Amazon cited and fined for willful serious safety violation at Kent fulfillment center

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The citation issued last month by the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries (L&I) against Amazon for safety violations in their Kent, Washington fulfillment center is another confirmation of the company's willful disregard for safety in the name of profit. The state safety agency released a statement March 21 announcing that the L&I inspection of 12 processes found that 10 of them at Amazon's Kent facility "create a serious hazard for work-related back, shoulder, wrist, and knee injuries."

L&I ergonomists performing the inspection found that the pace of work was unsafe. The physical work required by many Amazon jobs involves repetitive motions such as lifting, carrying, twisting, and other physical tasks. Amazon requires these tasks be performed at such a fast pace that it dramatically increases the risk of injury to workers.

The L&I citation describes the company's deficiencies as a "willful serious violation" and carries with it a \$60,000 fine for knowingly putting workers at a high risk of injury. Amazon is required by the citation to submit a written plan to L&I within 60 days explaining how the company will fix the safety issues. L&I offered some suggestions for Amazon to use to help reduce the risks of injury to workers including height adjustable platforms to reduce awkward lifting, using powered equipment to move heavier items, and, most critically, slowing the required pace of work.

Amazon has received similar citations at three other Washington state facilities, so the company has been made well aware of these safety failures. Because of this L&I has classified this most recent citation as a "willful violation," and it comes with a higher penalty. Amazon has denied that the pace of work in their facilities correlates to higher injury rates and has done nothing to mitigate these safety hazards.

Well aware of muscular skeletal disorder (MSD) risks for workers at Amazon, one of the world's richest men, Jeff Bezos, announced his plan last May to use technology to track workers' motions on the job to the point where the company would control which muscle groups workers use on a given day. These algorithms and surveillance methods are being used to ramp up exploitation of workers rather than slow down the pace of work in the interest of health and safety.

For a massive company like Amazon, with a 2021 Q4 net income of \$14.32 billion, the \$60,000 fine being imposed by L&I is easily ignored. The adage "If a penalty for a crime is a fine, then it is legal for the rich" applies very well here, as the "higher penalty" fine is just a drop of water in an ocean of Amazon profits.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Amazon has been repeatedly exposed as negligent in maintaining the health and safety of its workers. At the beginning of the pandemic, Amazon forced workers to sign nondisclosure agreements, subjecting workers to civil liability if they disclosed anything relating to Amazon's operations to the public. This helped Amazon to conceal information about the severity of COVID-19 infections both from the public and from its own workers in order to avoid disruptions to its operations as its profits skyrocketed.

Despite this attempt at covering up the lack of safety in their facilities, Amazon's Troutdale, Oregon facility (dubbed PDX9) was revealed to be one of its most dangerous. In 2019, the Portland Mercury newspaper reported, "26 out of every 100 workers at PDX9 sustained an injury in 2018." PDX9 was also discovered to be the workplace with the highest number of COVID-19 cases in the state of Oregon in August 2021, surpassing even those at overwhelmed medical centers like Salem Hospital and Asante Rogue Regional

Medical Center. Tellingly, the third place on the workplace outbreak list at the time was another Oregon Amazon facility, the Amazon Aumsville warehouse in Salem.

In August 2021, the Baltimore Amazon Workers Rank-and-file Safety Committee called out Amazon for “[burying] any real investigation into what happened” when workers suddenly got sick and lost their lives. The committee also said that Amazon only slows down its operations when it has to fix its machines or belts and never to sanitize or for other safety reasons.

Amazon only grudgingly enacted COVID-19 mitigation measures at the beginning of the pandemic, but pushed to end any protections against infection at the first opportunity. Mask requirements were twice dropped, with spikes in infections following just weeks afterwards. The most recent abandonment of COVID protections coincides with the larger effort by the US government and corporations to end public health measures and normalize mass infection.

On September 11, 2021, the WSWs International Amazon Workers Voice reported that Jeff Linnell, a 51-year-old safety ambassador who had worked at Amazon's Kent, Washington fulfillment center, had lost his life to COVID-19. Safety ambassadors were tasked with making sure other workers masked and socially-distanced appropriately. Linnell had contracted COVID-19 while working at the Amazon facility during the period following the second time Amazon dropped masking requirements. This tragic death illustrates the unwillingness of Amazon to adopt scientifically necessary steps to mitigate against the COVID-19 virus in its workplaces. Instead, Amazon has demonstrated that its sole concern is the removal of all barriers to profit, no matter the cost to workers.

In the last two years, the company has posted record profits, with a February 2022 report on its 2021 earnings stating that its “net sales increased 22% to \$469.8 billion, compared with 386.1 billion in 2020.” With its massive revenue and profits, Amazon could clearly afford to protect its workers from injury and infection, but chooses not to in the interests of maximizing profits for its shareholders. Instead, workers receive wages well below the level needed to maintain an adequate standard of living while being exposed to injury, infection, and possible death.

A study performed in 2020 by the Brookings Institute

found that Amazon “could have quadrupled the hazard pay they gave their frontline workers and still earned more profit than the previous year.”

Workers at Amazon are waging a struggle against brutal exploitation and risks to their lives and health. The WSWs calls on workers to establish independent rank-and-file committees to fight for their interests in opposition to the company and the entire corporate run political establishment and pro management unions. These committees, democratically run by workers themselves, must be based upon class struggle and not class collaboration.

We urge workers to contact the WSWs and the International Amazon Workers' Voice which will help Amazon workers around the world to form rank-and-file committees so workers can fight effectively and in solidarity with other workers in other industries globally for their lives and livelihoods.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**