

Amazon announces end to paid COVID-19 sick leave

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On April 29, Amazon announced to its nearly 1.3 million employees in the United States that the company would end COVID-19 case reporting and would return to pre-pandemic sick leave policies.

A text message sent to employees on Amazon's company app declares that it will "no longer send site-wide notifications of positive cases in our facilities, unless required by law." This is in keeping with "state governments across the country" who have also begun dropping measures "to reduce or end their own COVID-19 reporting."

"The sustained easing of the pandemic, ongoing availability of COVID-19 vaccines and treatments, and updated guidance from public health authorities, all signal we can continue to safely adjust to our pre-COVID policies," the notice informs workers. Finally, the memo added that Amazon was "returning to standard sick leave policies" which include "up to 5 days of excused, *unpaid time off* for a confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis" (emphasis added).

Amazon will also no longer provide dedicated time off for workers awaiting a test result following an exposure. Instead, "accrued time may be used for a COVID-19-related absence." The message hypocritically urges "everyone to continue taking the necessary precautions to protect themselves, their loved ones, and their communities."

Amazon's justifications for the removal of remaining COVID-19 protections are false. The pandemic is not "easing." According to the *New York Times* COVID-19 tracker, the United States counted 105,215 cases on Thursday, and the daily average of cases has risen to 67,953, up more than 59 percent over the past 14 days.

Hospitalizations are up 19 percent, despite recent efforts by the Biden administration to reduce COVID-19 hospitalization counts.

As for the claim that vaccines and treatments are widely available, the White House has stated that it "does not have adequate resources to purchase enough booster vaccine doses for all Americans, if additional doses are needed." The majority of the American population has not received a booster shot, and potentially lifesaving anti-viral treatments remain difficult to acquire in many areas.

Amazon's reduction of COVID-19 protections is the intended outcome of the accelerating abandonment of public health measures by the US government, particularly since the onset of the Omicron variant in late 2021. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) announcement at the end of December that it would recommend only five days of quarantine for an infection, down from 10 previously, was done at the request of American businesses, not on the basis of science, and was denounced by numerous epidemiologists at the time.

"The sheer number of people becoming infected—and therefore having to isolate or quarantine—threatens to crush the ability of hospitals, airlines and other businesses to stay open, experts say," stated an article published by the Associated Press in December.

Amazon, which struggled to meet demand during its lucrative holiday period due to the number of quarantined employees, has made previous moves to roll back COVID-19 safety measures. In January the company announced that it would limit the amount of paid sick time off from two weeks to only one. It justified this by claiming without evidence that the dangers posed by the "evolving COVID-19 pandemic" had "significantly decreased."

Further undermining public health, the Biden administration in late February decided to alter the way in which states were determined to be "high risk" of

infection, basing itself on hospitalizations instead of total cases. Using this formula, the CDC determined the majority of America could go unmasked. Days before this, Amazon also removed its mask requirements.

Amazon's rollback of safety measures to pre-COVID-19 levels will only intensify the pandemic and accelerate the spread of the disease. Given the corporation's outsized role in the US economy, its dropping of public health measures will be followed in workplaces throughout the country.

The immediate timing of the announcement was significant.

Last week, the company reported lower-than-expected revenue of \$116.4 billion for the last quarter. This reflected a loss of projected earnings of nearly \$3.8 billion, as "growth slowed to a pace unseen since the dot-com bubble burst in 2001," wrote *Yahoo! Finance*. The company's stock fell by 15 percent in response to its announcement.

An article in the *Washington Post* (which is owned by Amazon's founder and former CEO, Jeff Bezos) quotes company Chief Financial Officer Brian Olsalvsky, who noted that Amazon has gone "from being understaffed to being overstaffed."

Within this context, eliminating paid sick leave and other measures is part of an effort on Amazon's part to sweat even more out of its workers and reduce its labor costs at the expense of the health of workers and their families. The *Post* adds that this cost-saving drive could also take the form of employee "attrition," meaning the increasingly "strenuous working conditions" imposed on workers could drive down its headcount.

A number of news outlets have pointed out that Amazon's announcement that it would return to pre-pandemic sick leave policies was made only a day after the conclusion of the Amazon Labor Union's election at the LDJ5 warehouse in Staten Island, New York. It is possible that the company delayed its announcement until the vote was concluded to minimize its impact on the vote, which may have increased the ALU's support at the warehouse.



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