

Elon Musk orders office staff to return to on-site work or face termination

Shannon Jones

2 June 2022

On Wednesday Elon Musk, the world's richest man, issued an ultimatum to office workers at the electric car manufacturing company Tesla and the rocket company SpaceX to return to the office or be fired.

Writing in his typically crude and arrogant manner, Musk declared, "Everyone at Tesla is required to spend a minimum of 40 hours in the office per week," in an email titled "To be super clear." It continued, "Moreover, the office must be where your actual colleagues are located, not some remote pseudo office. If you don't show up, we will assume you have resigned."

In a post on Twitter, Musk said of those who objected to in-office work, "They should pretend to work somewhere else." Earlier the Tesla founder and CEO had written to executive staff requiring that they be in "a main Tesla office, not a remote branch office unrelated to the job duties."

Tesla has about 100,000 full-time employees worldwide, with production plants in the US, Germany and China and stores and service centers in about a dozen countries in Europe, Asia and North America. SpaceX employs about 12,000.

In his recent tweets Musk did not say anything about the enforcement of COVID-19 safety measures for those staff forced to resume in-person work.

The ultimatum comes as COVID-19 case numbers in California, the site of Tesla's giant Fremont EV assembly plant, are once again on the rise, as they are nationally. Musk has consistently downplayed the seriousness of the pandemic, telling SpaceX employees in March 2020 they had a greater chance of dying in a car crash than of COVID-19. In April 2020 he denounced COVID-19 restrictions as "fascist" in a profanity-laced rant during a conference call to discuss the company's profit report.

In May 2020 Musk defied a public health order from Alameda County, California, to reopen the Fremont Assembly plant. Tesla fired several workers for protesting the unsafe return to work, and county officials soon capitulated to the multi-billionaire, dropping any enforcement proceedings. Hundreds of plant workers were later infected with COVID-19, and an unknown number died.

Literally coining profit out of death, Musk and other billionaires saw their fortunes reach unprecedented new heights during the pandemic. Musk added \$121 billion to his net worth in 2021 alone. He is currently the world's richest man with around \$250 billion in net worth, about 10 times his wealth before the pandemic.

The Tesla founder and CEO is emblematic of the parasitism of the financial aristocracy, "*the rebirth of the lumpenproletariat on the heights of bourgeois society*," in the words of Karl Marx. While Tesla still produces less than 1 million vehicles a year, its stock valuation exceeds that of Toyota, General Motors, Stellantis and all other major car companies combined, based almost solely on speculation by stock market investors.

Musk's ultimatum to Tesla and SpaceX workers led to conjectures that he would apply a similar policy to Twitter employees following the completion of his takeover of the social media company. Many Twitter employees are currently allowed to work from home on a permanent basis, as are workers at Facebook and many other tech companies.

Most auto companies permit remote work for at least some office and tech workers. Return-to-office policies vary from company to company, with most facing significant worker resistance. On top of the danger of COVID-19, in-person work means a further erosion of workers' income given soaring fuel and transportation

costs. Some have predicted that Tesla could lose 10 to 20 percent of its current office workforce due to Musk's ultimatum.

In recent weeks Musk had contrasted US workers unfavorably with workers in China, tweeting that while Chinese workers were "burning the 3 a.m. oil," American workers, and by implication those at Tesla, were "trying to avoid going to work at all."

Tesla had kept operations in Shanghai going during the recent COVID-19 lockdowns by essentially locking workers inside the factories, while imposing 12-hour, 6-day schedules. Until recently many workers at Tesla in China had been literally sleeping on the floor inside the production facilities.

Musk did not say anything about China's Zero COVID policy, which has saved millions of lives during the pandemic.

Musk's demand for the end of at-home work is in line with the policies of the Biden administration, backed to the hilt by the corporatist trade unions, to declare the pandemic over and force the full reopening of the economy, including schools, factories and other workplaces. This homicidal "living with the virus" policy ensures a continuing toll of mass death and chronic sickness from Long COVID.

In March of this year Musk, an opponent of unionization, tauntingly invited the United Auto Workers to try to organize Tesla factories in the US. Despite the miserable pay and working conditions for the workers, the billionaire was well aware of the deep distrust felt by workers toward the UAW and all the official trade unions, which have enforced cuts in real pay and participated in the employer cover-up of COVID-19 infections and death.

For its part the UAW has essentially offered Tesla a sweetheart contract in exchange for the right to extract union dues from workers' paychecks.

In Germany, where Tesla recently open its Gigafactory in Berlin, the IG Metall trade union made a toothless promise to "support" any employee who opposes Musk's demand to return to work. IG Metall has helped enforce the homicidal return-to-work policy of Germany and capitalist governments across Europe, which has led to more than 1 million unnecessary deaths, while the union helps auto companies enforce layoffs and plant closures.

The return-to office demand follows reports in March

that Musk himself had contracted COVID-19 for the second time. He has promoted vaccine skepticism, but later reported that he and family members had been vaccinated.

All workers, whether they are office workers or production workers, "essential" or otherwise, deserve to be protected from COVID-19. This means rejection of the deadly and unscientific policy of "living with COVID" and fighting for a policy of global elimination and eradication. The recent success of China's Zero COVID policy in halting the spread of Omicron demonstrates this is entirely possible and would save countless millions of lives.

While Musk's pronouncements produce nervous embarrassment in some quarters of the ruling class, it is only because he articulates bluntly the rapaciousness of the ruling class, which through its single-minded pursuit of profit at the expense of social interests is leading mankind from disaster to even greater disaster.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact