Amazon denies sick leave to pregnant worker hospitalized with COVID-19

Nick Barrickman
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It has been nearly three months since Amazon announced the end to COVID-19 paid sick leave, daily text alerts for positive cases and other basic public health policies.

At the time, the corporation claimed that the "sustained easing of the pandemic," along with vaccines and other treatments, made it possible to cease its public health protocols. Amazon officials hypocritically called for workers to "continue taking the necessary precautions to protect themselves, their loved ones, and their communities."

Writing at the time of the dismantling of sick pay for COVID-19, the WSWS *International Amazon Workers Voice* (IAWV) explained, "Amazon's rollback of safety measures to pre-COVID-19 levels will only intensify the pandemic and accelerate the spread of the disease." This has been borne out in reality.

The IAWV was recently contacted by a pregnant Amazon worker from Baltimore, Maryland, who described the corporation's drive to maintain profits at the expense of the health of workers.

The worker, who is several months pregnant and tested positive earlier in July for COVID-19, told the IAWV that the corporation denied her appeals for sick leave, despite her symptoms being so severe that she was hospitalized.

"My symptoms started on the 19th," explained the worker, "J," who asked that her name be withheld out of fear of retaliation. "I was at work, I kept feeling a scratching sensation in my throat that gradually got worse." After speaking to her supervisors, J was sent to the company's in-house medical provider, Amcare.

"The doctors there barely even checked me," she said. "They kept their distance as they told me to open my mouth so they could see my throat (without a light or anything) then told me I was fine and to go back to work."

The IAWV has written previously about Amazon's company-owned health service, which is notorious for its unwillingness to prescribe care which may undercut Amazon's drive for productivity, as well as for its employment of unqualified personnel.

The worker had recently been moved from her position in stow, which she said was too physically demanding for her to keep up with. "Managers started getting more strict on me for going to the bathroom more often and getting more tired," she said.

Instead, she took a position as a picker, which was less physically demanding. According to *Warehouse Ninja*, stowing involves "the process of storing incoming inventory into an appropriate storage location for future retrieval." It is one of the most common jobs found in an Amazonian warehouse.

An internal Amazon health and wellness memo that was leaked last year to *Motherboard* stated that the average stower is expected to burn at least 400 calories an hour. Tech publication the *Verdict* commented that this hourly rate is equivalent to "the sort of work performed by galley slaves in olden times," who burned 451 calories an hour while "[r]owing at a sustainable rate."

"I then kept feeling very weak later on in the night and they wouldn't allow me to go home and made me work my full shift," J continued. The next morning she went to the hospital and tested positive for COVID-19.

Despite the seriousness of this situation, J was denied entry to a bed. "I then waited in the waiting room for 12 hours and was told they couldn't do anything for me," she said. "The first hospital I went to denied me a

room because they said they were focusing more on the 'severe patients' and said I didn't fall under that category."

"I went home and a couple days later I had to go back to another hospital and get multiple tests done because I got worse," she added.

As the BA.5 Omicron subvariant—the most transmissible version of the virus yet—has become dominant, COVID hospitalizations have tripled since the most recent ebb in mid-April. This has resulted in a situation in which a mother-to-be is unable to find a hospital room after testing positive for COVID-19, a potentially life-threatening illness.

J's difficulties were only just starting. "I was told by Amazon my leave was accepted the day I requested it. Today, a week later, they told me it was denied even though I had all the proof they asked for about me having COVID."

J continued, "I called the [Employee Resource Center], contacted [Human Resources] and made cases about my situation and they all told me it wasn't enough proof."

The worker provided the IAWV with screenshots of a doctor's note from a MedStar Health patient portal stating she was positive for COVID-19 and needed to be isolated "to make sure you do not infect anyone else." Despite this, Amazon "still denied it, saying it wasn't enough."

J currently has a pending appeal for sick leave open with the company. "I can barely even do anything. When I get up to try and do something in my house my heart rate jumps up to 115-130. … When my heart rate goes up my oxygen levels also go down. When I was in the hospital they said my oxygen would go down to a very dangerous level and had to do breathing treatments on me," she explained.

J emphasized that her child was "thankfully fine," but she wasn't. "[The hospital] did a CAT scan on me and found something in my lungs which also made the doctors decide I need to continue with my quarantine until things cleared up."

"A lot of people at Amazon are still testing positive for COVID," she explained. "They lifted the mask mandate there and now they're putting in more tables [in our break rooms] so people are closer together," she said. "It's like COVID no longer exists to them there."

Amazon's effort to force the pregnant worker back to work while hospitalized occurs just over two weeks since an Amazonian died in a warehouse in Carteret, New Jersey, during Prime Week. A recent article in the Daily Beast reported that 42-year old Rafael Reynaldo Mota Frias was "a hard-working dad from… who 'was everything to this family.'"

Cynically, Amazon spokespeople last week waved off claims that Frias had died due to work-related causes as "rumors." Instead, the company claimed the worker, who collapsed during a heart attack amid temperatures exceeding 90 degrees Fahrenheit, died as a result of a "personal medical condition."

Situations such as J's confirm the importance of the decision made by Amazon workers in Baltimore in 2020 to form an independent rank-and-file safety committee in order to protect their fellow Amazonians and save lives.

The group's founding statement declared: "[O]ur goal is to expose the conditions at our facility and the lies of management meant to cover them up. We are an organization of, for, and led by Amazon workers which will defend the rights and safety of our fellow employees."

It is vital for Amazon workers to demand that Amazon provides the resources and necessary sick leave to all of its employees infected with COVID-19, as well serious measures to stop the spread of COVID in the warehouses and assert workers' oversight over safety more broadly. A network of rank-and-file committees throughout Amazon's operations will provide the means to fight for these and other demands.

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