

“It’s like their budget is more important than the safety of staff and customers”

Whole Foods worker describes dangers of COVID-19 for US grocery workers

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The results of a Harvard study, released last Thursday by the medical journal BMJ, has confirmed the widely-held belief that US grocery store workers have a serious risk of contracting COVID-19 infections in their workplaces. At least 15,854 grocery store workers had been infected and 105 workers died over the first eight months of 2020, according to a conservative estimate by the United Food and Commercial Workers union in late August.

The Harvard study, entitled “Association between SARS-CoV-2 infection, exposure risk and mental health among a cohort of essential retail workers in the USA,” relied on secondary data collected in May as part of a city-wide mandated testing program in Boston, Massachusetts. It reported the results from one Boston, Massachusetts, area grocery store, where 21 out of 104 tested workers—or 20 percent—showed positive results for COVID-19. It also found that a large majority, 76 percent, of the participants who tested positive in the city-wide program were asymptomatic.

It is the first study to date to examine the mental health effects of the pandemic on grocery store workers in the US. Twenty-four percent experienced mental health concerns ranging from mild anxiety to depression, with eight percent with at least mild depression.

According to the results, “workers who screened positive for depression ... were less likely to practice social distancing consistently at work and more likely to commute by public transportation or shared rides, compared with those without depression.”

Researchers also found that workers in customer-facing positions were five times more likely to test positive for SARS-CoV-2 than those without direct customer exposures. This likelihood did not seem to be affected by the individual workers’ use of personal protective equipment or attempt to observe social distancing guidelines while on the job.

The study also debunked the efforts of employers to blame outside personal activities, not working conditions, for the spread of the contagion. “The SARS-CoV-2 infection rate among these retail employees was significantly higher than of the local community around similar time period, which was 0.9%–1.3%,” the researchers wrote, adding, “we did not observe a difference in SARS-CoV-2 community prevalence among those tested positive

versus negative employees, indicating the possibility of a true work-related SARS-CoV-2 exposure.”

A Whole Foods worker at a store in Florida, a major epicenter for the spread of the virus, was not surprised that the results of the study showed reasonable proof that the grocery workers contracted COVID-19 from the workplace given the conditions she and her coworkers experience daily.

She spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* under terms of anonymity to protect her job. Whole Foods is owned by Amazon, a corporation notorious for violating international workers’ democratic rights and imposing impossible production demands. It requires all workers to sign a waiver with a draconian clause stating that they will not speak negatively of the company in any way or risk firing.

“We’re so physically close to customers and have such a high volume of people in the store. In some departments, like produce, people are working elbow-to-elbow with one another. You can require customers to wear a mask on entry, but you can’t force them to keep it on. A lot of people have no choice but to get caught in a crowded situation.”

She described the measures, which amount to the purely cosmetic, that the company has implemented to keep profits flowing.

“The first thing we have to do when we come to work is to get our temperature taken. The machines are not always working though, so they have other equipment. We’re then offered a surgical or cloth mask depending on preference.

“They offer extra protection for the front-end baggers, who have face shields. But people who work in produce and grocery departments are stuck jam-packed with customers on top of them without protection.”

Because of the various initiatives that Amazon has pursued to satisfy its major shareholders’ profit demands, there are virtually no opportunities for workers to safely social distance. “In my store there are a lot of Amazon [personal] shoppers, sometimes as many as 15 to 20. They really congest the store and cause overcrowding, both in front where the customers are and in back where workers are.

“They’ve starting ‘flexing’ with the cashiers,” she continued.

Whole Foods uses a scheme to work around social distancing guidelines to ensure the maximum productivity at its cash registers. “They have one cashier in a pod, and one ‘on flex.’ If it’s busy, you go in the pod if you’re on flex and ring for ten minutes, then step away for one minute, and then start your clock again. It can go on for hours but on paper it looks like you were only in the pod working next to someone for ten minutes at a time.”

“They tried to map out the break area for us to be six feet apart, but there’s too many of us. People have to sit on the stairs. Also, we’re no longer allowed to sit outside because they are using that space just for customers.”

Amazon is engaged in an ongoing cover-up of the number of actual cases at its warehouses and Whole Foods stores, against the demands of rank-and-file workers for transparency. In an October blog post management quietly revealed that nearly 20,000 US Amazon and Whole Foods workers had been infected. These numbers had been kept out of sight since the beginning of the pandemic.

“When someone tests positive, we get notified, but not what department or where they are in the store. We get anywhere from 1–5 of these notifications every month.”

As the virus is allowed to run rampant throughout the workforce, Amazon’s CEO Jeff Bezos, the world’s wealthiest oligarch, has increased his own personal wealth more than \$87 billion since the beginning of the year.

“We’re supposed to have only a certain number of customers in the store but based on payroll for the day we may not have enough to monitor that number. It’s like the budget is more important than safety of staff and customers.

“I was upset that they took away our hazard pay. They suspended the time and attendance policy, but then reinstated it and made it retroactive, so that any absences taken before the suspension were calculated back in. They never made any announcement about it, I found out through the grapevine. When I asked a supervisor if they’d be posting the news, they shrugged their shoulders and said no.”

Amazon’s brutal time and attendance policy for Whole Foods workers guarantees that workers will be penalized for staying home sick. “You can have one absence per month, and three absences in three months before being written up. You’re terminated if you have more than three absences in three months.

“When Amazon took over, they took away sick days. People are still losing their jobs. They gave a leave of absence of up to six months for workers who were at high risk, but that is ending soon, and they’ll have to make a decision of whether to come back and risk it or stop working here.”

She said that most workers are very careful to abide by public health measures in their personal lives. “We just go to work and our family. We’re not going out into the world and socializing. The college-age kids get a bad reputation in the media, but in my store the young workers are taking it seriously. The positive test results are most likely [from transmission] in the store.

“Amazon is all about trimming everyone to the bone, always one person doing the job of two or more people. Full timers only get up to 36 hours per week and part timers get up to 30 hours per

week. The turnover is still high and when new people are being hired, they come in as part timers with no benefits.

“The attitude is ‘hurry up and work faster.’ If I knew Amazon was in the throes of buying Whole Foods, I probably would not have applied. We’re being timed, we have to meet productivity standards, or they will fire us and hire someone else.”

The *International Amazon Workers Voice* is calling on Whole Foods and other grocery workers to build rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, to demand the release of information on outbreaks and to enforce health and safety and prepare collective action, including strikes, against unsafe conditions.

In June, the Network for Public Health Law issued a study titled, “Workplace Disparities: Gaps in COVID-19 Protections for Grocery Workers.” It noted that “Nearly six percent of grocery employees are older than 65 while almost 15 percent are between the ages of 55 and 64” and that workers with disabilities, many of whom are at a higher risk for contracting COVID-19, are more likely to be employed in retail trade than in other industries.

The report also pointed to the fact that in 2019, grocery store cashiers made average annual wages of just \$24,990 per year—well below the US Federal Poverty Threshold of \$25,750 per year for a family of four. Only 51 percent of retail workers were eligible to receive health insurance benefits from their employers. Only 64 percent had paid sick leave and just 15 percent had access to paid family leave in 2019, according to the report.

Grocery store jobs for all workers in the US average \$35,329 per year, according to the job website ZipRecruiter. This amounts to an average poverty wage of only \$17 per hour. The conditions of poverty and lack of health care place many grocery store workers in the life-and-death position of whether to quarantine at home and receive treatment for COVID-19 symptoms without pay or to go to work and come in contact with the virus.



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