

Silencing of Whistleblowers in the Workplace is a Threat to Public Health

Given the immediate public health risks, we are calling for an urgent expansion and improved enforcement of legal protections for workers who speak out and take collective action against dangerous workplace conditions that risk exacerbating the spread of COVID-19 in communities. Workers themselves are in the best position to raise health and safety concerns, and if these concerns are ignored, or worse, if workers are retaliated against, it not only impacts those workers and their families, but risks accelerating the current public health crisis.

Over the last few weeks, Amazon fired at least six workers who had spoken out about unsafe working conditions in warehouses. In addition to these firings, other workers at Amazon have reported receiving arbitrary work-related warnings as a result of speaking out or participating in walkouts, and they fear that they are being set-up for termination. Given that Amazon is the second largest private employer in the United States and is significantly expanding its workforce during the crisis, this apparent pattern of retaliation is alarming.

Thousands of warehouse, delivery, and grocery workers are on the front lines of this fight, risking contracting and spreading COVID-19 every day in order to provide essential goods. This risk disproportionately falls on communities of color, who are more likely to hold these jobs and more vulnerable to the virus, as a result of the systemic racism that undermines health in these communities.

These essential workers are calling for common sense measures in line with CDC guidance: implementation of six feet of distance between all individuals in the facility, personal protective equipment for all, time for handwashing, temporarily closing and cleaning exposed facilities to allow for quarantine, independent and transparent reporting, and paid leave policies to help exposed and sick workers to stay home.

Instead of adopting policies to protect workers, corporations are increasingly adopting invasive surveillance technologies to penalize and monitor lower-wage workers. This already predatory surveillance could too easily be turned against protected concerted activity and workers voicing concerns. We know that the mere presence of pervasive surveillance is likely to silence dissent, but not to protect health.

People who take action and speak out are not only exercising their legally protected right to protest and organize collectively for safe working conditions, but also acting in the national interest and protecting public health. Large facilities like warehouses, factories, and meatpacking plants employ thousands of people and grocery stores are major points of social interaction--if necessary precautions are not taken, COVID-19 could easily spread throughout communities. The right to demand better health and safety measures needs to be protected in order to limit the spread of COVID-19.

The current crisis has elevated workplace whistleblowing and collective action to a matter of national health and additional protection and enforcement measures are urgently necessary.

In Solidarity,

Access Now
Action Center on Race and the Economy
AI Now Institute
Alternate ROOTS
Athena Coalition
Black Alliance for Just Immigration
Center on Privacy & Technology at Georgetown Law
Color of Change
Community Justice Exchange
Constitutional Alliance
Defending Rights & Dissent
Demand Progress Education Fund
Ella Baker Center
Fight for the Future
Free Press
Freedom of the Press Foundation
Global Action Project
Government Accountability Project
Instituto de Educacion Popular del Sur de California
Just Futures Law
Line Break Media
Make the Road New Jersey
Make the Road New York
Media Mobilizing Project
MediaJustice
MPower Change
Muslim Advocates
National Employment Law Project (NELP)
National Immigration Law Center
New America Center on Education and Labor
New America's Open Technology Institute
New York Communities for Change
Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition
Open Markets Institute
Open MIC (Open Media and Information Companies Initiative)
Partnership for Working Families
People Demanding Action
People For the American Way
PeoplesHub

Project Censored
Project On Government Oversight
Public Citizen
RootsAction.org
RYSE Center
Secure Justice
Surveillance Technology Oversight Project (STOP)
The Awood Center
The Civil Liberties Defense Center
The Tully Center for Free Speech
United for Respect
United We Dream
Warehouse Worker Resource Center
Whistleblower & Source Protection Program at ExposeFacts
Woodhull Freedom Foundation
XLab