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Covid Variant Adds to Worker Anxieties

Noam Scheiber

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[Workers' Anxiety Grows as Covid Variant Casts a Shadow](#)

Some see an undue rush by employers to get workplaces back to normal, whether by dropping precautions or imposing new rules.



Credit...David Walter Banks for The New York Times

When Kelly Harris, a personal grocery shopper in Steubenville, Ohio, was vaccinated in March against Covid-19, it was a huge relief. “I felt the weight of the world off my shoulders,” she said.

Her sense of relief has turned to dread. After most supermarkets eased masking requirements in May, mask wearing plummeted in her area. She worried about bringing the virus home to her school-age children.

Then, as the Delta variant proliferated in recent weeks, her anxiety levels spiked again. “I try to stay away from everybody and use self-checkout,” she said. “It has me pretty stressed out.”

Judging from the policies of the stores Ms. Harris frequents, many employers appear to regard the recent increase in Covid infections as a mere blip on the long-awaited road to normal.

Some companies have intensified their efforts to return to a pandemic before-times, easing safety protocols while expecting employees to return to previous routines.

But for many workers, the perception is quite different: a sense of rising vulnerability and frustration even for the vaccinated, who find themselves inundated with stories of breakthrough infections and long Covid.

The gulf between employers' actions and workers' concerns appears to foreshadow a period of rising tensions between the two, and unions appear to be positioning themselves for it. Some unions are calling on companies to do more to keep members safe, while others are questioning new vaccination requirements. The two positions may seem at odds, but they send a common message: Not so fast.

"I think we're rushing to return to normal," said Marc Perrone, the president of the United Food and Commercial Workers, which has over one million members in industries like groceries and meatpacking.

Many workers complain about a mismatch between plans their employers appear to have made before the rise of the variant and the reality of the past few weeks.

For much of the pandemic, Amazon has offered free on-site Covid testing for employees. It incorporated a variety of design features into warehouses to promote social distancing. But a worker at an Amazon warehouse in Oregon, who did not want to be named for fear of retribution, said there had been a gradual reduction in safety features, like the removal of physical barriers to enforce social distancing.

Your Coronavirus Tracker: We'll send you the latest data for places you care about each day.

Kelly Nantel, an Amazon spokeswoman, said that the company had removed barriers in some parts of warehouses where workers don't spend much time in proximity, but that it had kept up distancing measures in other areas, like break rooms.

"We're continuously evaluating the temporary measures we implemented in response to Covid-19 and making adjustments in alignment with public health authority guidance," Ms. Nantel said. She added that the company would "begin ramping down our U.S. testing operations by July 30, 2021."

At REI, the outdoor equipment and apparel retailer, four workers in different parts of the country, who asked not to be named for fear of workplace repercussions, complained that the company had recently enacted a potentially more punitive attendance policy it had planned to put in place just before the pandemic. Under the policy, part-time workers who use more than their allotted sick days are subject to discipline up to termination if the absences are unexcused. The workers also said they were concerned that many stores — after restricting capacity until this spring — had become more and more crowded.

Halley Knigge, a spokeswoman for REI, said that under its new policies the company allowed part-time workers to accrue sick leave for the first time and that the disciplinary policy was not substantively new but merely reworded. The stores, she added, continue to restrict occupancy to no more than 50 percent capacity, as they have since June 2020.

Workers elsewhere in the retail industry also complained about the growing crowds and difficulty of distancing inside stores like supermarkets. Karyn Johnson-Dorsey, a personal shopper from Riverside, Calif., who finds work on Instacart but also has her own roster of clients, said it had been increasingly difficult to maintain a safe distance from unmasked customers since the state eased masking and capacity restrictions in mid-June.

"You have whole families who are picking out a pound of ground beef," she said. "Children who are not vaccinated because of age are touching everything, not masked, either."



Credit...Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Ms. Johnson-Dorsey, who had Covid last year and was vaccinated in March, said that what she was encountering in stores had become a major source of worry as the Delta variant spread. “I think it’s just showing that maybe we jumped too quickly to try and beat this imaginary deadline,” she said.

On Tuesday, after the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provided new guidance on masking](#), some employers said they would adjust their policies as warranted.

“We’d always defer to state and local ordinances on capacity and masking mandates,” said a spokeswoman for Albertsons, which also owns Safeway and Jewel-Osco. “We don’t have a national mandate on capacity at this time.”

Ms. Harris and Ms. Johnson-Dorsey, the personal shoppers, do not belong to a union, but Bob O’Toole, the president of the food workers local in Chicago, which represents more than 15,000 workers in the grocery, meatpacking and food-processing industries, said many of his members shared their sentiments.

“The employees don’t feel as though the employers are doing anything to enhance safety after so many precautions were relaxed,” he wrote in a text message.

Mr. Perrone, the international president for the food workers union, said in a statement on Tuesday that the new C.D.C. guidance wasn’t sufficient and urged a national mask mandate.

[Public-sector workers](#), too, have expressed safety concerns as officials move to get government services back to prepandemic norms. In Chicago, Mayor Lori Lightfoot recently [brought back](#) office-based city employees who had been working remotely during the pandemic.

But one of the unions representing them, the Illinois council of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, has argued that more needs to be done to space workers apart and improve ventilation.

“The workplaces where those people work could be sources of transmission because we live in a cubicle world where people are often very close together,” said Roberta Lynch, the union’s executive director in the state. “We want to ensure that people who have high-risk work locations are able to work safely.”

A spokeswoman for the mayor did not respond to a request for comment.

The Office and Professional Employees International Union, which represents nurses who are increasingly subject to vaccine requirements around the country, is unlikely to take a position on the mandates per se but will

seek to have a voice in setting policy to guarantee that employees are treated fairly, said Sandy Pope, its bargaining director. For example, the union wants to ensure that no workers are disciplined or fired for refusing the vaccine if they have legitimate reasons for doing so.

“We will demand to be consulted on these things,” Ms. Pope said. “I know a couple of members who have legitimate health issues that have prevented them from being vaccinated.”

The union, which also represents clerical workers at insurance companies, credit unions and universities, has employee-management committees pushing to arrange adequate ventilation systems for workers, with mixed results, she said. She added that the union was preparing for a potential standoff in September, when many employers have said they will end hybrid work arrangements and require full-time attendance.

“I think that’s going to be the big fight,” Ms. Pope said. “A number of employers had September as the target date.”



Credit...John Locher/Associated Press

By contrast, the United Automobile Workers union said it was working with major automakers through a Covid task force to help make safety decisions. [General Motors](#) and [Ford Motor](#) both recently reinstated masking for all employees at separate sites in Missouri, and Ford reinstated masking at offices in Florida, after the companies assessed virus-related data in those regions. And a number of employers, including Amazon and the meat processor JBS, have had vaccination facilities for workers on site.

Some unions may have been spared a fight by the C.D.C.’s move on Tuesday. In Las Vegas, the Culinary Workers Union, which represents casino workers, has been calling for the return of a mask requirement for all customers indoors since Nevada [relaxed the requirement in May](#). The casinos had not heeded the call, but after the C.D.C. announcement, the state [said it would reimpose](#) an indoor mask mandate.

In other cases, a reckoning still looms. The federal government’s mask mandate on airplanes is [set to expire](#) after Sept. 13, and unions representing airplane personnel are uneasy about the possibility that it will lapse, though Tuesday’s C.D.C. announcement suggests it may be more likely to be extended. The unions have applauded the airlines for moving to stop the spread of the coronavirus on airplanes by installing more sophisticated air filtration systems, but maintain that they are not sufficient.

“Filtration is helpful for circulated air in the cabin,” said Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants. “But it doesn’t stop the general spread from one person to another sitting six inches apart.”