

Instacart workers strike amid COVID-19 fears, call company response a 'sick joke'

Hours before the protest, Instacart addressed some safety concerns. But, workers say, it wasn't enough.

Instacart workers are holding a strike across the US on Monday to demand more protections from the company. The move comes as a growing number of grocery delivery workers for Instacart say they're getting sick with COVID-19 symptoms, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus. They say the company hasn't done enough to safeguard them against the illness.



"We are staging an emergency walk off because we had no other choice -- working conditions had become dire," said Sarah Clarke, an organizer for the nonprofit Gig Workers Collective, which helped plan Monday's strike. "Instacart had spent the past three weeks ignoring Instacart workers' pleas for basic protection during this pandemic."

Gig workers, like Instacart shoppers and Uber and Lyft drivers, have been on the front lines during the coronavirus outbreak. They shop and deliver food to those who've been quarantined and often take sick people to hospitals. Several US states have recognized their importance, deeming their labor "essential," meaning they can continue to work as the virus spreads.

Because gig workers are classified as independent contractors, rather than employees, they don't qualify for company health insurance, sick leave, family leave, disability or workers compensation. Instacart, and other gig economy companies, have offered workers two weeks sick leave if they get COVID-19 or are mandated to quarantine.

"Our team has had an unwavering commitment to prioritize the health and safety of the entire Instacart community," Nilam Ganenthiran, Instacart's president, said in a statement on Sunday. "We've been evaluating the COVID-19 crisis minute by minute to provide real-time support for Instacart shoppers and customers throughout North America."

But many workers say that pay is hard to come by. An Instacart shopper near Portland, Oregon, told CNET last week that after coming down with COVID-19 symptoms and submitting a doctor's letter to the company, the shopper still couldn't get sick pay from Instacart.

Hundreds of gig workers across the country have said they fear working because they're vulnerable to the coronavirus, which as of Monday has infected more than 770,000 people and killed nearly 37,000 worldwide. Other workers have tested positive for COVID-19 and have been put under quarantine.

I am striking because I have severe asthma. I am at a very high risk of dying if I catch this virus.
Instacart shopper

Many Instacart shoppers say that during this pandemic, work for them has become a life or death matter.

"I am striking because I have severe asthma. I am at a very high risk of dying if I catch this virus," one Instacart shopper said. "My four boys and husband need me alive, so I strike."

The strike

For the strike, Instacart workers had five demands of the company: provide free hand sanitizer; add \$5 per order for "hazard pay;" change the default in-app tip amount from 5% to 10%; pay for two weeks sick leave to anyone with a doctor's note requiring self-quarantine, including those vulnerable to the virus; and extend the original sick pay deadline past April 8.

"Health professionals are literally saying going to the grocery store is a medium risk activity and to spend as little time there as possible," one Instacart shopper said. "And we are expected to do orders and get paid just as we always have."

Days before the strike, Instacart agreed to some of the demands. The company said it will work with a third-party manufacturer to develop its own hand sanitizer and supply it for free to workers starting this week. It'll also extend the sick pay deadline to May 8. As far as the default tipping, it will now let customers set their own tipping percentage in the app rather than use the company's.

But Gig Workers Collective called Instacart's response a "sick joke."

"Aside from simply not being enough, this is insulting for a number of reasons," the group wrote in a blog post on Sunday, noting that neither the hazard pay nor vulnerable workers were addressed by the company. "The strike is still on."

The worker protest has gathered support from a number of politicians, including Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders. On Sunday, the Democratic presidential candidate tweeted, "Instacart was last valued at nearly \$8 billion. A company of this size should not be forcing its workers to put themselves -- and us all -- at risk."

Instacart doesn't appear to be fazed, however. Over the past month, business has been better than ever, the company said. It currently operates in 5,500 cities in the US and Canada. And Instacart announced last week that

it was recruiting another 300,000 shoppers over the next three months to keep up with customer demand.

"We respect the rights of shoppers to provide us feedback and voice their concerns," an Instacart spokeswoman said Monday. But "as it relates to today's actions, we've seen absolutely no impact to Instacart's operations."

To that, Gig Workers Collective ended the day with its own retort.

"Instead of focusing its attention on addressing the ongoing health and safety crisis," the group wrote in a blog post. "Instacart has chosen to use its time discrediting the significance, reach, and impact of our walk off."

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