

Rapid growth of COVID-19 in eastern Pennsylvania

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COVID-19 pandemic is spreading rapidly in eastern Pennsylvania, largely the result of manufacturers and distributors refusing to curtail production.

Luzerne County reports over 1,000 documented cases of COVID-19 and eight deaths, all men, with the youngest victim just 48 years old. The great majority of documented cases, roughly 900, are concentrated in the small city of Hazleton, which has a population of 25,000 and a median income that is half the national average. Cases in the former coal mining city “continue to climb exponentially,” according to a media account published Tuesday.

Lehigh and Northampton counties, whose largest cities are the former steel milling centers of Allentown and Bethlehem, respectively, reported a combined 2,200 cases as of Tuesday. Monroe County, which borders New Jersey, reported over 600 cases, and Lackawanna County, whose largest city is Scranton, reported nearly 300.

The regional economy is closely linked to that of New York City, through production, transportation, and the movement of workers.

A Wilkes-Barre area plant of Mission Foods, which specializes in “authentic Mexican food products,” has ordered workers to continue to report to work in spite of an outbreak of COVID-19 at the facility. Twenty-two workers at the facility were diagnosed with the disease days ago, but management has ordered the workforce of over 500 to continue to report “even if they’re experiencing symptoms of COVID-19—or risk losing their jobs,” according to a media report based on a conversation with a Local 1776 United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) official, Wendell Young. Workers also report that the building “is not being sanitized properly, that employees are working nearly ‘elbow-to-elbow’ on assembly and production

lines and not maintaining a 6-foot distance from each other, and that some are ‘coughing and gagging’ as they work the lines.”

The UFCW has not called workers out on strike against these clearly life-threatening conditions. In an email to the media, plant manager Hugo Andrade claimed, “there is no indication that the employees contracted COVID-19 while present at our facility.”

In Hazleton, the epidemic is also concentrated among workers compelled to report at regional industrial parks. “We’re in crisis mode because we’re seeing that Hazleton, out of all Luzerne County, that Hazleton is really going to be ground zero for this,” said state Representative Tarah Toohil. “The numbers are affecting the Spanish-speaking community that works in the industrial parks ... We have industrial plants where management was not following the OSHA guidelines and the CDC recommendations.” But Toohil admitted that regional politicians would do little more than to ask plant owners to “hit the pause button.”

Likewise, an industrial park near Wilkes-Barre has generated “many complaints, most anonymous, from workers alleging they are packed too closely into workplaces without access to protective gear,” according to a local news story. A county official heading up inspections at the plant, solidarized himself with the plant owners, insisting that the facilities were safe. In any case, he admitted, “we can’t force them to do anything.”

On Tuesday, five days after Hazleton was labeled a coronavirus “hot spot” by public health officials, Cargill Inc. finally announced a temporary suspension of its operation at its 900-employee meat processing facility in the city. Cargill, the Minnesota-based food and petrochemical giant, has a market value estimated at \$55 billion.

Also on Tuesday, an Amazon employee at the firm's Breinigsville location, near Allentown, tested positive for the coronavirus, and two workers at Bimbo Bakeries in the city were diagnosed with the disease. A spokesman for Bimbo Bakeries said production would continue, but that the company would make greater efforts at social distancing in the plant.



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