North Dakota General Electric wind turbine plant closes as 128 people test positive for COVID-19

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This Monday, an additional 128 COVID-19 cases were reported after the testing of employees of a wind turbine blade facility in Grand Forks, North Dakota. The outbreak was only discovered after the screening of half the 900 employees at the LM Wind Power factor, a business of General Electric, and their close contacts.

In response to the outbreak, North Dakota Republican Governor Doug Burgum issued a 14-day quarantine order for all of the employees of the plant, and GE has closed the plant down for cleaning and disinfection while paying the quarantined employees. The plant, which produces blades for wind turbines, will remain closed for at least two weeks. Some of the employees and contacts of the employees who tested positive are from neighboring states—including 11 confirmed cases in Minnesota that are linked to LM Wind Power.

Yesterday, local and state health agencies along with the North Dakota National Guard held mass testing events for residents in hopes of containing the spread of the virus. The testing was open to contacts of LM Wind Power employees and workers at another factory, J. M. Simplot, which has been closed for two weeks for cleaning.

Earlier this week, Burgum had extended the emergency lockdown measures of the state to April 30, and had set requirements to ending those restrictions including mass testing and contact tracing for those who do test positive. Currently, the Trump administration, along with the media, is pushing for an early return to work across the US.

Prior to the outbreak, employees and residents of Grand Forks had sharply criticized the response of GE. According to the *Star Tribune*, workers at the LM Wind Power plant had raised concerns about their safety in March, but neither officials in the city government nor the company sent any health inspectors or tested any employees.

Emails released by the city of Grand Forks show that an LM Wind Power employee had emailed the city expressing concern about the company's "indifference to recommendations made by health professionals," also saying that the company had ignored basic social distancing suggestions, such as staggering work hours, ceasing large meetings, and allowing some employees to work from home.

The outbreak came after three days of record increases in confirmed cases, bringing the total to 644. As of last Sunday, there had been 10 COVID-related deaths in the state.

The Grand Forks outbreak demonstrates the need for immediate mass testing for COVID-19, which has been stressed by World Health Organization doctors. North Dakota is sparsely populated and before the outbreak, according to officials, was the state least affected in the US by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Larissa Bouschee, a former LM Wind Power Employee, told WZFG news that the company was not following guidelines set by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. She said the plant did not post notices about an ongoing investigation by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

"Nobody quickly responded," she says of company, local and OSHA officials. "They (LM) do not care about their employees."

According to Bouschee, an executive said, "We will not be closing."

She continued, "Health handed it off to the mayor,

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the mayor handed it to economic development and economic development conducted a phone call.”

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