

Nearly 300 meat-processing workers infected by coronavirus at German slaughterhouse

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At a slaughterhouse in the German state of Baden-Württemberg, almost 300 workers have tested positive for COVID-19. The Romanian government appears to have been the first authority to break the news, since about 200 of the affected workers are Romanian nationals.

According to reports, the workers are not seasonally employed, but are fully legal employees in Germany's meat processing industry. They belong to a large, super-exploited group of Eastern European workers who are typically hired by sub-contractors, who contract the workers out to German companies where they are paid starvation wages and labour under appalling conditions.

The slaughterhouse, which is in Birkenfeld near Forzheim and operated by Müller Fleisch, has 1,100 employees, including around 500 workers from Romania. Other workers come from Hungary and Poland.

Following the recent death of a Romanian fruit picker, Agriculture Minister Julia Klöckner described the authority's response to COVID-19 cases among migrant workers as "practical quarantine with a simultaneous opportunity to work." This appears to have been the approach taken at the slaughterhouse as well.

This approach would be more accurately summed up as highly dangerous forced labour.

As early as April 7, the *Schwarzwälder Bote* reported on the first indications of a coronavirus outbreak at the facility. According to the newspaper, a worker at the meat processing firm, who lived in communal accommodation, felt so bad that he called the police. He was immediately taken to hospital and received a positive test result for COVID-19 two days later.

Subsequent tests on fellow residents revealed that 10 other people were already infected. By this point at the

latest, the local health agency, the police, the slaughterhouse operator, the sub-contractor, and the accommodation provider recognised that coronavirus was spreading unhindered at the facility. Nonetheless, the slaughterhouse was not shut down.

The only countermeasure taken was that those who had tested positive were transferred to a separate accommodation facility, which was described in reports as "isolation." Over the past 14 days, tests were gradually carried out on all of the 1,100 workers. Full results are yet to be made public, but 270 workers have already tested positive.

At least five are in hospital, with one in intensive care who is struggling for his life on a ventilator.

The mayor of Höfen, a local town, explicitly complained about the meat processing firm. Company management failed even to provide information about where the affected workers were housed and where they were registered, he said. Many were allegedly not even officially registered with the authorities. It is "hardly surprising" that one infection "triggered an avalanche," said the mayor.

The fact that the meat processing workers were not even officially registered is typical for the entire industry. The chains of subcontractors that bring these workers to Germany operate like the mafia. To evade taxes and charges, workers are not officially registered, and they hardly ever receive written contracts. Their wages are often far below the legal minimum wage. They are accommodated in run-down buildings, former hotels, or containers. They typically sleep four to one room, and the washing facilities are abysmal: perfect conditions for the spread of COVID-19.

The Müller Fleisch workers are accommodated in several communal facilities in small towns near Forzheim. The anger of the mayor of Höfen, where

confirmed cases jumped rapidly from three to 26, reflects the outrage and concern among the broader population. Even so, the slaughterhouse is not being shut down.

On April 24, when it was already clear that at least 230 workers were infected, the local health agency decided that the Müller Fleisch facility could continue operating.

The *Schwarzwälder Bote* cited Bastian Rosenau, a local councillor, who claimed at a press conference on April 23, “There is no increased risk for consumers.” The plant has to continue operating, he added, because it would be impossible to send all 1,100 workers home or into quarantine overnight. Trying to do so would certainly cause the virus to spread uncontrollably, he added. By contrast, within the Müller firm, there is a “closed system” where all of the infection chains can be traced.

All of those infected must now be accommodated at a single location, the local councillor demanded. “Therefore, the district authorities will remove all of those infected from their communal housing and accommodate them in a few locations together ... in serious cases halls may be used.” The *Schwarzwälder Bote* concluded, “One issue is the medical treatment, but the other is of course the ease of control.”

In other words, the authorities are focused on isolating the impoverished workers from the rest of the population while allowing production to keep running. The two heads and owners of the company, Martin and Stefan Müller, stated in a telephone conference, according to *Focus*, that nothing about the quarantine would change “whether Müller Fleisch continues to operate or not.”

The two businessmen made clear the real economic reason for their stance, stating that the meat packing company has to fulfil contracts with its suppliers and purchase animals from farmers. What this means is that the economic position of the company takes priority over the health and wellbeing of its workforce.

With incredible cynicism, they added that the idea that the company could influence the way in which its workers are accommodated is “horrific” and “absolutely forbidden under the law.” They arrogantly declared that the company is not obliged to bear the costs of quarantine, but added that out of a sense of “moral duty” they would make a contribution to the

cost.

On April 28, the Romanian consul Radu Florea made a failed attempt to contact the Romanian workers and their supervisor at Müller Fleisch. Instead, Forzheim’s first mayor, Dirk Büscher (Christian Democrats), reassured him that the workers are being “well looked after” and there have been no complaints, reported the *Forzheimer Curier*.

The cold-heartedness with which politicians, businessmen, and journalists disregard the health and wellbeing of workers is breath-taking. It represents a grave threat to the working class, including those who have a German passport.

The idea that the pandemic can simply be set aside is an illusion.

This bitter truth is currently being experienced by Singapore. It is paying for this illusion with a powerful second wave of the virus. The government appeared to have instituted the World Health Organisation’s advice, “test, trace contacts, and isolate” for its “own” population to the letter. But it did nothing for the most oppressed layers, migrant workers, who live in communal housing shut off from the rest of society. The virus was left to run rampant there and is now spreading throughout society as a whole.

Similarly, in Germany the attempt to isolate meatpackers, fruit pickers, refugees and prisoners from the local population will not protect the general population from the virus.



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