

New outbreaks of COVID-19 reported at workplaces across the US

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Despite the rosy assurances by federal, state and local authorities that the pandemic is well under control, and states can safely reopen their economies, the COVID-19 virus continues to spread to workplaces throughout the US.

In Newton, Iowa, 30 miles east of Des Moines, it was first reported on April 13 that two workers at TPI Composites, a manufacturing facility specializing in wind turbine blades, tested positive for COVID-19. The plant is the largest employer in the area, with more than 1,000 workers. By April 25, at least 200 workers at the plant tested positive. Four days later, a worker from the facility fatally succumbed to the virus.

Prior to his death, Kyle Brown, a 54-year-old maintenance worker at TPI, published on April 18 a Facebook post detailing his efforts to get tested. The post is representative of the various absurd hurdles workers often have to go through to receive a test.

In his post, which currently has one thousand shares and over two hundred comments, Brown wrote that he first sought to get tested at UnityPoint Health, a hospital in Marshalltown, Iowa, but was denied.

He reported that he could not get testing, “Since I don’t work at a meat packing plant and I’m under 65,” adding, “I told them I have been exposed at work by numerous people that tested positive, and I am currently showing all of the symptoms including a fever of 101.8 [degrees Fahrenheit]. They said I don’t meet the [Iowa Department of Public Health’s (IDPH)] guidelines and they can’t do it.”

Brown was eventually able to get a test at a hospital in Newton, MercyOne Medical Center, located 40 minutes away. Inexplicably, he was told at this facility that he met the IDPH’s guidelines and was able to get tested without delay.

An article in the *Des Moines Register* from May 3

reported that Brown made three attempts to be admitted to an emergency room as his condition worsened, first at UnityPoint, then MercyOne. In each instance, he was turned away because his blood-oxygen level was too high. Eventually, once his blood-oxygen level reached “appropriate” levels, he was admitted to UnityPoint where he subsequently passed away.

Elsewhere in Iowa, eight employees at a Bridgestone tire manufacturing plant in Des Moines have tested positive for COVID-19. The facility closed for three weeks in March for “deep cleaning,” but despite this a worker tested positive for the virus on April 23.

Memphis Light, Gas and Water (MLGW), which provides utilities to residents of Memphis, Tennessee and surrounding Shelby County, announced on May 6 that at least sixteen of its employees have tested positive for COVID-19, with one worker having died. In the central part of the state, at an Albéa packaging facility in Shelbyville, Tennessee, at least one worker has been infected. Shelbyville is the site of a Tyson Foods processing facility that now has over one hundred cases of COVID-19.

The world’s largest manufacturer of elevators, Otis, confirmed on Tuesday that one worker at its Florence, South Carolina factory had contracted the virus and is currently under quarantine. The plant resumed operations Thursday after what a company spokesperson described as an “additional deep cleaning.”

The pandemic also continues to sweep through grocery and retail establishments, with new reports of positive cases and outbreaks among Whole Foods and Walmart workers.

This week, a Whole Foods in Pasadena, California confirmed that one worker there has contracted the virus. As well, at least three workers at a Whole Foods

in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania have tested positive. Regarding the latter, it was not until after rumors started circulating in the store and online that the company announced that a worker had been infected. Speaking to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, one worker stated, “There’s no transparency between us and management, so we have no idea what’s going on.”

Several Walmart stores in Massachusetts have been forced to close after multiple outbreaks. On April 29, a Walmart in Worcester was forced to temporarily shut down after the town issued a cease-and-desist order. Eighty-one of its 414 employees have contracted the virus. A Walmart store in Abington, Massachusetts closed down Wednesday after approximately one dozen out of 180 employees tested positive. Yok Yen Lee, a 69-year-old Walmart worker in nearby Quincy, died on May 3. Lee was one of eleven workers at her store who were confirmed to have contracted the virus.

Under conditions where the spread of the virus is showing no signs of slowing, the Trump administration is preparing to close up shop on COVID-19. As the WSWS reported recently, the administration plans to “wind down” the federal task force overseeing the pandemic response in the US while shifting all its efforts towards forcing workers back to the factories and other workplaces.

The homicidal push to reopen the economy is not simply an expression of the corrupt Trump administration but is in fact a bipartisan effort. States helmed by Democratic governors are preparing to reopen despite not meeting the loose guidelines formulated by the White House. Among them is Michigan, led by Democratic governor Gretchen Whitmer, which will allow auto plants to reopen as soon as May 11. Trump, the Republicans and the Democrats are all operating at the behest of the corporate-financial oligarchy, under the mantra of “the cure can’t be worse than the disease,” protecting profits over lives.

This presents dire implications for the working class. The reckless reopening of the economy will lead to hundreds of thousands of new cases and thousands more deaths. Workers must resist these efforts. To do that, workers need to form their own independent rank-and-file committees in their workplaces and communities and unite these with other sections of workers in the US and internationally. As well, workers

must equip themselves with the program and perspective of international socialism, which places social need over the rapacious pursuit of profits.



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