

Hundreds of COVID-19 infections in German meatpacking plants

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The coronavirus pandemic is spreading rapidly in the meat processing industry. Recently, hundreds of workers in a slaughterhouse have become infected with COVID-19.

At Westfleisch in Coesfeld, North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), 151 of a total of 1,200 employees have so far tested positive for COVID-19. Thirteen workers had to be taken to hospital immediately. The agreed-upon relaxation of the COVID-19 measures for the district was suspended yesterday until further notice.

The Westfleisch group of companies, based in Münster, is the third-largest meat processing conglomerate in Germany. In Oer-Erkenschwick, 33 of 1,250 workers at the Westfleisch plant have become infected. In Hamm, more than 1,000 workers of the same group have to be tested for the coronavirus. The two plants are also located in NRW.

Westfleisch in Coesfeld is now the third German slaughterhouse where many workers have been infected with the coronavirus. Previously, 300 slaughterhouse workers from Müller Fleisch in Birkenfeld near Pforzheim had been infected.

Ten days ago, two workers at slaughterhouse operator Vion in Bad Bramstedt (Schleswig-Holstein) were also infected with COVID-19, and by May 7, at least 109 workers had tested positive in the same slaughterhouse. The Vion Food Group is one of the largest slaughterhouse operators in Europe, with an annual turnover of over €5 billion.

The rapid spread of the coronavirus among abattoir workers is an international phenomenon. As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported, US slaughterhouses are currently hotspots of the pandemic. More than 6,500 workers in large meatpacking companies have already been infected. At least 25 meatpacking workers in the US have already died of COVID-19.

The Trump government has classified the meat industry

as vital infrastructure and thus prevented its closure, although the operators do not provide workers with the necessary protective equipment, let alone sufficient testing facilities. Trump sees the slaughterhouses, where thousands of immigrant workers from Latin America slave away, as important examples to force all workers back to work.

There have already been several spontaneous strikes in the US against these infections. Dozens of workers at a Smithfield Foods pork plant in Crete, Nebraska, are demanding the closure of the plant after 48 workers there tested positive. In Kathleen, Georgia, and Sioux Falls, South Dakota, meat industry workers have also protested and spontaneously gone on strike for proper protection and sanitation measures.

Immigrants from Romania are the main workers in the German meatpacking industry. They are hired through subcontractors networked throughout Europe and are among the most exploited low-wage workers. Although they work all year round in Germany, they are only given fixed-term contracts.

They are completely dependent on the subcontractors who broker them to the meat companies, like modern slaves. Officially, they receive the legal minimum wage of €9.35 gross, but large sums are deducted from this in brokers fees, accommodation, transport, laundry, tool costs, etc.

Since Romania became an EU member over 10 years ago, the German meat industry has benefited from such exploitative relations. After the fall of the Stalinist regimes 30 years ago, financially powerful investors have plundered eastern European industries and lands, leaving increasing unemployment, poverty and blatant social inequality for the population. Since then, many thousands of Romanian workers have been forced to look for employment in Germany.

It is no coincidence that it is precisely these workers

who are the victims of each new COVID-19 outbreak. The employee of an advice centre for south-east European butchers told broadcaster WDR that one of the main reasons the virus was spreading so quickly among the workers is because they are simply fatigued. “Many are very exhausted because they have to work long and hard,” the employee said. “They are housed in accommodation where there is no question of protection and safe distancing. These establishments must be closed immediately.”

In Germany, the establishment politicians have so far followed a special quarantine policy in agreement with the corporations. This consists essentially of isolating these cheap labourers from the rest of the population, while the factory continues to operate, if possible. Federal Minister of Agriculture Julia Klöckner (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) coined the term “de facto quarantine with simultaneous work opportunities” for this type of dangerous forced labour.

Similarly, certain nursing homes, prisons and above all the refugee accommodation and anchor centres have been sealed off. For these most oppressed layers, the decisive coronavirus measures—systematic testing, contact tracing, isolation—are essentially considered unnecessary.

This is taking its toll in Coesfeld, where total infections have increased dramatically throughout the entire district, which currently has the highest rate of new infections in NRW. Since Thursday, it has clearly exceeded the limit set by the federal and state governments’ for the loosening of measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19. This limit was set at 50 infected persons per 100,000 inhabitants, based on the recommendations of the public health body the Robert Koch Institute.

Initially, it was decided that production would continue at Westfleisch in Coesfeld. Despite the outbreak, the shortage of employees is not as serious as initially assumed, the company announced on Thursday.

However, this decision had been revised by Friday evening. Since most of the media are now reporting on the unchecked spread of the coronavirus in the slaughterhouses and residents are protesting, it has suddenly been announced that the slaughterhouse will be shut down after all. The authorities fear that continued operation of the slaughterhouse could lead to massive protests among the population and strikes by the workers.

In Baden-Württemberg, the state health office decided on April 24 that slaughterhouse operator Müller Fleisch in Birkenfeld had to continue operating, even though it was already clear that at least 230 workers had been infected.

Since then, workers there have slaved away for 12 hours a day seven days a week to compensate for the staff losses, as one worker told the *Pforzheimer Kurier*.

In the case of harvest worker Nicolae Bahan in Bad Krozingen, who died of COVID-19 on April 11, it was not even considered necessary to interrupt the asparagus harvest for a day following his death. As is being done practically everywhere, quarantine there consisted only of isolating the workers from the rest of the population.

In Schleswig-Holstein, the Vion meat plant has only been shuttered for two weeks, beginning last Wednesday. Workers are in quarantine and are not allowed to leave their accommodation in a former barracks. Before that, management and local politicians had also vigorously resisted a shutdown. A district administrator wrote in his press release as late as Wednesday, “Again and again, I am asked why the district does not simply shut down the factory? The answer, ‘Legally we have no means of doing so, since food production is considered to be critical and the transmission of the virus through foodstuffs has not yet been shown.’”

The spread of coronavirus throughout the meat processing industry drastically illustrates the capitalist principle that the economic interests of the big corporations and banks take precedence over the life and health of the working class.

It is necessary to respond to this through the independent and international mobilisation of the working class, which must defend its health and conditions of life against the drive for profits by the corporations and banks. The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) is fighting for the establishment of independent action committees in all factories and a socialist programme.



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