

After COVID-19 infection discovered, 300 workers walk out of Mississippi pillow factory

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Three hundred workers walked out of the Brentwood Originals pillow factory in Walls, Mississippi on Monday after a coworker tested positive and supervisors sought to cover it up. The factory is the biggest employer in Walls, a small town about 20 miles south of Memphis, Tennessee, with 1,181 residents, nearly 20 percent of whom live below the official poverty line.

Concern over a possible plantwide spread of the virus was mounting for days when a worker at the plant told supervisors that her husband—also a Brentwood worker—had tested positive for COVID-19. Management, however, took no steps to protect or even inform workers. When confronted, they claimed that that they did not have medical documents to prove the worker was infected.

In an interview with FOX13 Memphis, Brentwood Originals worker Carolyn Vardaman, employed for over four years at the facility and a mother of six, said that as workers were walking out Monday morning, she confronted the supervisor. “I would have stayed, but after I talked to the manager and he told me that the wife did come to work this morning and reported that her husband had COVID-19, but they didn’t have any documentation, so there was nothing they could do.”

Defying threats of retaliation, Vardaman said, “Because people are dying from this and it seems to me that you have to speak out. Someone has to speak out. If it has to be me, okay, I love my life.”

The company responded to the walkout by saying it would pay workers Monday and Tuesday and clean up the plant before restarting production on Wednesday. Asked if work had resumed, Vardaman told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Yes, but people went, and some walked back out. They’re saying workers can either stay or leave,” but after Monday or Tuesday, she said,

there would be no further financial support.

The California-based company employs 650 workers and had sales of \$150 million last year. Average wages for production workers are \$11 an hour, with recent postings by workers online noting low pay and heavy lifting. A recent post on an employer-rating page said, “Brentwood went through management changes a couple of years ago and fell into a complete mess. Good luck if you choose to go into slavery. They will use you and abuse you while smiling right in your eyes.”

Currently there are over 10,000 people infected with COVID-19 and 465 fatalities in Mississippi. Like states across the US, corporations and Mississippi politicians are using the threat of unemployment and destitution to force workers to remain in unsafe factories and workplaces.

On Wednesday, Republican Governor Tate Reeves said that landlords would be able to start evicting tenants again starting June 1 after a two-month suspension he had enacted ended. Joblessness in the state is at an all-time high, with 200,000 Mississippians filing for unemployment benefits and many more prevented due to a clogged state system.

Announcing a temporary extension of benefits, Reeves declared Wednesday, “There is no real government replacement for a job. I know most Mississippians are ready and eager to work. Please do not let the window pass you by. If you are lucky enough to get an offer to earn a living, please do not reject it. I do not want you to wake up in August with no job to return to.”

The Brentwood Originals walkout takes place as Reeves moves to reopen the economy, with salons, barbershops and gyms, all potential vectors of the disease, being the latest businesses to be allowed to

resume operations. “The next phase is to take a surgical approach rather than a sledgehammer to this disease,” Reeves declared. While protecting corporate interests, the only “sledgehammer” will be a further surge of the deadly disease. But the efforts to “normalize” death is encountering ever-greater opposition from the working class.

Over the last several weeks there have been other strikes and job actions across the southern US, including sickouts by public transit workers in Arkansas, American Apparel garment workers in Selma, Alabama, Kroger warehouse workers in Memphis, Tennessee, and bus drivers and auto parts workers in Birmingham, Alabama.



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