

Mississippi: Workers at Brentwood Originals pillow factory continue walkouts

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Workers at the Brentwood Originals pillow factory in Walls, Mississippi walked out again Thursday over concerns about the ongoing presence of COVID-19 within the factory. Over 300 workers walked out earlier in the week after management attempted to keep workers ignorant of a case of COVID-19 at the plant.

The company is the largest employer in Walls, which is in the outskirts of the Memphis, Tennessee metropolitan area. Brentwood Originals, based in California, employs 650 workers and had sales of \$150 million last year. Average wages for its production workers are just \$11 an hour.

Implausibly, Brentwood Originals CEO Loren Sweet sought to claim that workers did not walk out on Thursday, stating instead that the company stopped production on its own volition in order to address employee concerns and “rumors.”

“We shared our concerns and what we had done to address theirs,” Sweet said in an email to the local Fox News affiliate. “It was a great opportunity for them to ‘vent,’ and we developed a list of issues raised that we promised them a response to.”

Carolyn Vardaman, employee of Brentwood Originals and mother of six, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that no employee has received testing for the coronavirus. Furthermore, when asked about the strikes engulfing various industries in the United States and abroad, she expressed support and empathy for the workers carrying out strikes over dangerous working conditions, and voiced her opposition to the social and economic inequality afflicting the working class.

The walkouts at the pillow factory in Mississippi are part of a wave of wildcat strikes and other job actions by the working class across the United States and internationally, with workers demanding protection from the virulent COVID-19 disease, personal

protective equipment (PPE), and a shutdown of nonessential production. The necessity for a link-up between autoworkers, retail workers, teachers, Amazon workers, meat and food processing workers and others is ever more urgent.

Fox News noted that although some workers returned to the plant following the discussion with management Thursday, a number of others left for the day. Vardaman expressed concerns over her health and said she went home. Another worker, who did not wish to be identified, told Fox, “My bag is already in the car. I am leaving and going home because it is not sanitary.”

On Wednesday, Brenisha Goodman, a three-year employee at the facility and seven months pregnant, told local reporters, “Really, the rest of this week I think that I will not be returning to work. I might try Monday to see if they did anything, but if not, no.”

Brentwood had closed the plant Monday and Tuesday for a “deep cleaning” after the case of COVID-19 could no longer be concealed. However, workers have raised doubts about the company’s claims to have “deep cleaned” the plant, with videos being circulated showing material on the plant’s floors.

CEO Loren Sweet inadvertently admitted the incomplete character of cleaning efforts in attempting to respond to the videos, writing, “There were videos circulating with pictures of polyester on the floor. The cleaning was not to sweep the polyester off the floor. Pillow factories have polyester ‘everywhere.’”

The coronavirus has been reported to live on metal surfaces for up to five days, wood four days, plastics between two and three days, and cardboard for a day. Though the nucleic acids from the virus have been detected in fabrics, it is unknown whether this may lead to infection. Regardless, the virus can survive on a multitude of surfaces for days, rendering a two-day

cleaning virtually useless if one infected person reenters the facility.

Opposition by workers to life-threatening working conditions continues to emerge in city after city and is being fueled by the accelerating bipartisan efforts to restart production and other economic activity—and thus the flow of profits—in the midst of the pandemic.

During his daily COVID-19 press briefing Friday afternoon, Republican Governor Tate Reeves amended Mississippi’s “Safer at Home” order to reopen tattoo parlors and casinos. Reeves has already made moves to reopen the economy, in line with many of his Democratic and Republican counterparts, previously allowing salons, barbershops, and gyms, all of which are potential vectors of the disease, to begin serving customers again.

The Safer at Home executive order issued by Reeves, having begun April 27, has already been effectively ended as of 8:00 a.m. on Monday, May 11. In the wake of reopening the state’s economy, the Mississippi Department of Health reported 393 new coronavirus cases on Thursday, the third highest number to date, and 318 Friday. The state has reported 10,801 COVID-19 cases and 493 deaths to date.

As with other states in the US South, the widespread poverty across much of Mississippi places workers at immense risk should the virus surge. Approximately one in five Mississippi residents lives in poverty, an underestimation given the abysmally low threshold, an annual income of just \$24,250 for a family of four, which the US Census characterizes as poverty.

The state is also among the five most vulnerable to the coronavirus pandemic, particularly ill-equipped to respond to it, according to a report recently released by the Surgo Foundation think tank.



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