

One dead and more than 600 Irish meat processing workers infected with coronavirus

Robert Stevens
16 May 2020

More than 600 coronavirus infections have been reported at meat processing plants across Ireland. This week, the first worker employed at one of the plants to have died of COVID-19 was named. Lucianna Vivienne day Silva, aged 58, died at her home in Dungannon on May 3. Also known as Anoy Soriano, she was born in east Timor and worked for Irish conglomerate Moy Park.

Substantial numbers employed in the industry are foreign nationals, including many from eastern Europe. In some plants up to 70–90 percent of the workforce are migrants, many sharing the same cramped housing—providing opportunities for the disease to spread.

As of yesterday, there were 23,956 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Ireland and 1,518 deaths. The country has one of the highest death ratios globally, with 305 per million population. In Northern Ireland, 4,317 people have tested positive, with 469 deaths.

Government figures reveal outbreaks at 12 meat processing plants in the Republic of Ireland, with 571 workers testing positive. According to the Siptu trade union, up to 15 workers in the Republic have been hospitalised by the illness.

What is happening in Ireland is a global phenomenon. US slaughterhouses are hotspots of the pandemic, with more than 6,500 workers in large meatpacking companies already infected. At least 25 meatpacking workers in the US have died of COVID-19. Hundreds of infections have been reported in Germany.

The Irish Republic and Northern Ireland are major centres of the industry. The agri-food sector is worth £12.3 billion and is the main domestic industry, employing more than 170,000 people. Meat products are exported to more than 180 countries. The Republic is Europe's biggest beef exporter, selling 90 percent of its beef to the UK, France, Italy, Germany and other countries. One of Ireland's largest firms, Dawn Meats, produces more than 400 million burgers a year for McDonald's outlets in the UK and Europe.

Much of the industry is centred in the North's Mid-Ulster region where Moy Park is located. This has one of the

highest rates of infection in Northern Ireland.

Moy Park has 12 processing and manufacturing units in Northern Ireland, England, France and the Netherlands. It is one of the UK's top 15 food companies, the largest private sector business in Northern Ireland and one of Europe's leading poultry producers. The company supplies around a quarter of the total western European chicken parent market. It processes over 280 million birds per year and produces around 200,000 tons of prepared foods.

In 2017, Moy Park was acquired by the US-based Pilgrim's Pride Corporation—owned by the JBS food processing giant—for €1.32 billion. Pilgrim's is one of the largest chicken producers in the world, with over 40,000 employees and operations in the US, Mexico and Puerto Rico. It reported annual revenues of US\$11.41 billion in 2019.

How rife coronavirus infections are in the industry can be seen in the number of plants—employing thousands of workers in close proximity—hit by outbreaks:

- Earlier this month 120 confirmed cases were reported at Rosderra's plant in Roscrea, County Tipperary. According to a Sinn Féin representative, of 350 workers at the plant, up to 140 had to take time off sick. Rosderra is the largest pork processing company in Ireland.

- This week it was revealed that 60 employees at Rosderra Meats' Edenderry plant in County Offaly had tested positive for the virus.

- Dawn Meats was forced to temporarily close its plant in Kilbeggan, Westmeath at the beginning of the month after four workers tested positive for coronavirus.

- Kepak has 11 manufacturing plants across Ireland, employing 2,800 people and an annual turnover of about €950 million. It had cases confirmed at plants including Ballymahon, Athleague and Watergrasshill. The Watergrasshill plant is in Ireland's second largest city, Cork, with 650 workers employed. Following what was described as a “mass testing” this week, sources told the local *Echo* newspaper there were a number of infections.

- The Unite union said it had knowledge of seven cases of

COVID-19 at Linden Foods. The firm employs around 1,100 workers at two sites in Dungannon.

Omagh Meats, owned by the Foyle Food Group Limited, employs 1,400 across the UK and Ireland. The *Belfast Telegraph* reported this week that the plant was subject to a Health and Safety Executive (HSENI) inspection. It appears that the authorities acted not as the result of the death of Anoy Soriano, but following a “high volume of complaints from concerned workers about Covid-19 prevention policies at Omagh Meats.” The company denied that 40 of its workforce had been laid low by the virus, but would not give a figure.

This week, Independent parliamentarian Denis Naughten said there were clusters of coronavirus infections within populations around processing plants, under conditions “where the levels of infection within the plants themselves is up on one third or, in some instances, half of the workforce.”

Throughout the pandemic, the meat processing conglomerates have only been concerned with shoring up their profits. Employees in the industry are considered “key workers,” but, like health workers and transport workers, have been left to work in deplorable and lethal conditions. The *Irish Examiner* reported yesterday, “Meat workers ... told RTE’s *Today Show* ... that sick workers had returned to factories, including those with temperatures, that no social distancing was practiced on production lines and that no protective equipment, such as masks, were made available until very recently.”

Fianna Fáil opposition leader Micheál Martin told the Dáil Thursday, “The situation with meat plants is gravely serious and it is not obvious that these clusters are being dealt with comprehensively. Without calling for the shutting down of the sector, it seems very surprising that the blanket testing of a facility is followed by no interruption of work until the results are returned.”

In March, workers at several plants protested to demand safe working conditions, including social distancing. Within hours of each other, around 1,000 workers protested at Moy Park’s Portadown facility and 80 employees at ABP Meats in Lurgan. One worker at Moy Park’s Dungannon operation—where Anoy Soriano worked—posted a photo on Twitter showing staff crammed into a crowded canteen. At ABP, the workers demanded social distancing and the deep cleaning of workstations previously used by workers who tested positive for COVID-19. ABP is owned by Larry Goodman, worth an estimated €2.45 billion.

As the pandemic took hold in Ireland, the Health and Safety Executive oversaw recommendations that plants supposedly must adhere to, in discussion with employers, trade unions and the Public Health Agency. Since then, the trade unions, in alliance with the political elite, have played

a critical role in policing the working force, allowing unsafe plants to remain in operation.

This week, Siptu deputy general secretary Gerry McCormack commented, “What seems to have happened is that some employers really didn’t take this seriously. Some of them did. Some employers completely ignored the recommendations from the HSE on how to do physical distancing and put in proper processes to protect workers.”

Despite this admission, the union opposes forcing unsafe plants to close, with its latest proposals only the “urgent need for a taskforce involving all meat industry stakeholders to be set up by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.”

Unite has called for Moy Park’s Dungannon plant to close temporarily to allow the workforce to be tested.

Sinn Féin agriculture spokesman Brian Stanley commented of the horrific situation at Rosderra Irish Meats. “The worst scenario is in the case of the Roscrea [plant] where it’s had an outbreak of Covid. *We want to keep the factories open. We’ve been very, very clear about this.* That factory, there are around 350 workers on the factory floor. There was up to 140 of those out sick throughout last week and 120 tested positive.”

In recognition at workers’ growing anger at the situation, Unite regional official Sean McKeever said this week, “In the face of total and continued inaction by Stormont Ministers on this crisis in the meatpacking sector, workers will have to organise to defend themselves.”

It is necessary for workers to organise themselves, including strikes to force the closure of all plants deemed unsafe. But they must carry out this struggle independently of the trade union bureaucracy.

Workers must establish rank-and-file factory and workplace committees to demand the closure of infected plants, full compensation for laid-off workers, and no return to work until these committees, working in conjunction with health care professionals, are satisfied that all workers have the necessary protective equipment, testing and environment to work safely.



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