

Three UK meat processing workers die of COVID-19

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Three workers at a plant operated by Cranswick Convenience Foods in Barnsley, England have died after contracting COVID-19. They have not been named.

They were among nine confirmed cases of the disease at the meat processing factory located in Wombwell, near Barnsley in South Yorkshire. Seven workers were hospitalized, including the three who died. Two have been discharged and have returned to work while another has been discharged but not yet returned. The latest case was reported on May 11.

The three who died worked in different sections of the Wombwell factory. According to the National Pig Association website, “The most recent dates the workers who died had been on the site were March 29, April 6 and April 7.”

The Wombwell sliced meat factory employs 1,200 workers and is part of the Hull-based Cranswick plc—a FTSE 250 index-listed company.

Cranswick processes a third of all pigs produced in the UK for meat consumption. Overall, it employs nearly 7,000 people across 16 sites in the UK, including one in Ballymena in County Antrim, Northern Ireland. With revenues of £1.44 billion, it reported pre-tax profits in 2019 of £92 million. The firm produces fresh pork, gourmet sausages, cooked meat, air-dried bacon, cooked poultry, charcuterie, sandwiches and pastry products for supermarkets and exports to Europe, America, and southeast Asia.

On May 20, the *Guardian* reported comments from a family member of a worker in the Wombwell plant about working conditions. Speaking anonymously, she explained that employees had initially been told social distancing was not possible and masks would not be available because they were needed by the National Health Service. Unlike in meat processing plants in Northern Ireland, where COVID-19 cases had occurred, no deep cleaning had taken place. Social distancing had only been implemented in the canteen area over the last week.

The family member continued, “If you don’t feel well and know if you don’t go to work you’re only going to get the

statutory sick pay [£95.85 a week] and are not going to be able to pay the bills, what are you going to do? I am scared he could bring it home to us and our kids. They [plant workers] have not been happy, but they’re all scared to say anything because of losing their jobs. It’s a shit way to go for £9 an hour.”

The *Food Manufacture* website reported May 19, “Cranswick started to plan for the impending coronavirus pandemic in late February, and factories are now operating social distancing, staggered shifts, increased cleaning and hygiene including hand sanitizers, screens and personal protective equipment where needed. ... car parks and public areas have implemented two-metre distancing and additional marquees have been erected with single tables for staff.”

A spokesperson for the company told the press, “Cranswick employees are designated key workers ... We are doing everything we can to protect them while they carry out this critical role.”

A company spokesman told the *Guardian* that visors were available and temperature checks would be carried out on staff as they came into the building.

The family member responded by asking, “Why are they now implementing things this far into it after the deaths have happened and we’ve had the risk?” The GMB union represents some of the workers at the plant, but as of yesterday, there has been no statement on the deaths by the GMB Yorkshire and North Derbyshire.

Cranswick has a record of safety breaches and protests by workers over dangerous working conditions.

In May 2007, a cleaner, Lynda Trebilcock, died horrifically with her head cut off in a giant meat blending machine at a DeliCo Ltd plant in Buckinghamshire. DeliCo was bought by Cranswick Convenience Foods the previous year. In 2009, DeliCo was fined just £160,000 over the incident after being found guilty of breaching the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974.

In February 2011, Cranswick Convenience Foods was found guilty at Barnsley magistrates’ courts of safety breaches and fined £14,000. In December 2009, James

Hardcastle, a worker at the Wombwell plant, lost his hand when his arm became trapped in a machine. It was shown that a supervisor had overridden a safety device and Hardcastle, who had been feeding meat into the machine, got his arm caught leading to his hand having to be amputated. Three months later another worker, Liam Hodgson lost the ends of two fingers on his right hand when feeding plastic film used to wrap meats into a machine.

In August and September 2012, around 80 butchers at Cranswick's food processing plant at Preston, near Hull, held a series of three strikes. The GMB members were protesting the introduction of a new contract, the use of new machinery and a cut in pay.

At the time, the Food Manufacture website cited the comments of the GMB's Dave Oglesby who said, "I've been a union rep for eight years and I've never seen a company be so aggressive towards its workers." He explained how new methods meant having to work faster to keep up with the speed of the lines and giving notice to use the toilet. "There's been an increase in butchers getting cuts on their hands because they're being asked to work so much faster—like machines. There's fatigue and stress issues too. One chap collapsed on the line a couple of weeks ago. The overriding threat is that if butchers aren't working to the correct speed and standard, they will cut their pay even further."

A fourth strike was avoided when the GMB reached a deal with the company.

In December 2018, around 200 staff at the Preston site walked out in an unofficial strike. They drew up a list of seven demands including increasing the numbers working on production lines and a pay increase in line with the National Minimum Wage rise. A striker told the *Hull Daily Mail*, "The situation has come about from desperate people. We are going to protest outside the factory until we get an answer."

A letter drawn up by the strikers said they had previously demanded better conditions, but, "Working conditions did not change, and became even worse. The staff is expected to work faster, in [a] stressful and exhausting environment. The pay rates per hour remain the same." The letter asked the company to "not increase the speed of the production [line] constantly."

Other meat processing plants in the UK have reported cases of COVID-19 infection. These include a worker at a Morrison's-owned meat processing plant in Spalding, Lincolnshire, in April. Also in Spalding, several employees at Dalehead Foods—a division of Tulip Ltd—tested positive for the disease. In early May, a worker at Irish-based Greencore's processing plant in Northampton tested positive.

This month, the Office of National Statistics published a report showing that male operatives in processing plants had a death rate from COVID-19 of 37.7 per 100,000 compared to white-collar workers, where the rate is 5.6.

Internationally, meat processing workers have been among the most affected by the pandemic. In the US, there have been COVID-19 infections at over 60 plants, with around 3,500 cases and at least 17 deaths.

German meat processing plants that rely heavily on migrant labour from Eastern Europe have seen a high incidence of COVID-19 infections. In just one plant, Müller-Fleisch in Birkenfeld, 400 workers tested positive from a workforce of 1,100, forcing the closure of the plant.

In Ireland, there have been over 600 cases of COVID-19 infection among meat processing workers, including one death.

Workers should heed the statement made by Cranswick after the deaths. The firm stated, "We continue to work with the relevant regulatory bodies including the HSE (Health & Safety Executive), PHE (Public Health England), the FSA (Food Standards Agency) and local EHO representatives (Environmental Health Officers) during these challenging times."

Less than four miles from Cranswick's Wombwell operation is a warehouse run by the fashion retailer Asos. The Regulatory Services department of Labour-controlled Barnsley Council has done nothing to prevent that business from continuing its operations. Despite there being nine confirmed cases of the virus at the Asos warehouse, the Community trade union and Barnsley Council worked together in opposition to a call by workers for the closure of the premises to allow the organisation of a deep clean.

Meat processing workers at Cranswick and other plants must establish rank-and-file safety committees demanding the closure of factories where infections have taken place. They should only reopen after a deep clean and when all necessary protective equipment and safety measures have been introduced.



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