

# US corporations, government cover up workplace infections and deaths

Jerry White  
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Major corporations and federal and state agencies that are responsible for workplace safety are deliberately concealing the number of COVID-19 infections and deaths in factories, warehouses and other workplaces, according to several news reports.

The effort to downplay the actual conditions in the meatpacking, logistics, auto and other industries is key to the Trump administration's efforts to break the resistance of workers who are unwilling to risk their lives for the profit interests of the corporations.

The *New York Times* reported Tuesday that Smithfield, Tyson, JBS and other meatpacking companies have refused to reveal the number of infected workers since they reopened the slaughterhouses and meat processing plants under Trump's April 28 executive order. Dozens of factories were shut after a series of job actions and protests by workers demanding protection and the truth about the spread of the contagion.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has grossly underestimated the number of infections in the industry, claiming that less than 5,000 workers were infected as of the end of last month. According to the *Times*, however, the nonprofit group Food & Environment Reporting Network estimated last week that the number has shot up to more than 17,000, with at least 66 fatalities.

Another organization, the Environmental Working Group, cited in a *Washington Post* report, said four of the plants that reopened—Tyson operations in Logansport, Indiana; Perry, Iowa and Waterloo, Iowa; and a Smithfield plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota—had all seen outbreaks of at least 700 cases. In Iowa, Nebraska and South Dakota, coronavirus cases linked to meat workers represent 18, 20 and 29 percent of the states' total cases, respectively, according to the group.

Governor Pete Ricketts of Nebraska announced earlier this month that his state would not disclose the number of coronavirus cases in specific plants without the consent of the companies.

The *Times* report was based on internal emails from state and county health agencies obtained through public records requests by Columbia University's Brown Institute for Media Innovation. It detailed how local agencies have colluded with the corporations to conceal the truth from workers and the

public.

After an outbreak at the Smithfield Foods plant in Tar Heel, North Carolina, one of the world's largest pork processing facilities, county officials would not provide any data. "There has been a stigma associated with the virus," said Teresa Duncan, the director of the health department in Bladen County, where the plant is located. "So, we're trying to protect privacy."

Melissa Packer, the assistant health director in neighboring Robeson County, where 59 residents who work at the Tar Heel facility became infected, reported that several county officials were opposed to making the numbers public. "Some local health directors from the counties where there are processing plants expressed some concerns about how that may negatively impact the relationship they have built with the management of the companies."

A county health official in Colorado was even blunter regarding an outbreak at a Cargill plant in Fort Morgan, where at least one worker died. "Bad news spreads way faster than the truth. At this point, we are not doing anything to cast them in a bad light. We will not throw them to the Press."

## Logistics

Amazon, headed by Jeff Bezos, the world's richest man, has refused to disclose how many workers have gotten sick or died, saying such data is not "particularly useful." Jana Jumpp, an Amazon worker in Indiana who has been compiling a list of confirmed cases, says at least 900 workers have been infected. The company confirmed the deaths of eight workers only after they were reported by several media outlets.

An Amazon worker in the Detroit suburb of Romulus, Michigan told Fox 2 News that dozens of his coworkers have contracted COVID-19. "It's so stressful, the thought of knowing that you've got to go back to this place, and then if you cough, they tell you to stay home. And if you stay home, they're penalizing you for it... It does clearly state in that handbook if you go on a medical leave, your spot is not

guaranteed.”

*ProPublica* reported an incident on April 16 when security guards at a Nike distribution center in Memphis, Tennessee turned away a county health inspector investigating the death of a worker from COVID-19. “It didn’t matter that she was there to investigate health conditions at a Nike distribution center where, five days earlier, company officials learned a temporary worker had died after testing positive for the novel coronavirus. The security guard staffing the gate at the sprawling site said that without an appointment, no one could come in.”

The day after, however, an administrator from the athletic shoemaker, which received a 15-year \$58 million tax break from the city, spoke with county health officials, who promptly accepted his claims that safety improvements had been made, and then dropped the case.

In addition to Nike, which has 21 confirmed cases at its Memphis facilities, there have been several other cases in “America’s Distribution Center,” where 43,000 workers are employed in transportation and warehousing. At least three workers have tested positive at a Kroger warehouse; ten at a FedEx hub, and an employee has reported more than 20 infected coworkers at PFS, a distribution center that ships jewelry and makeup.

The Tennessee Occupational Safety and Health Administration (TOSHA) does not require employers to determine whether an infected employee contracted the virus at work in areas where there has been community spread, according to the *ProPublica* report.

## Auto industry

On May 21, tens of thousands of autoworkers returned to plants in Michigan and other states after an eight-week shutdown, which came about only because of wildcat strikes and other job actions carried out in defiance of threats by the company and the United Auto Workers union.

The following day, Ford was forced to temporarily shut its Chicago Assembly Plant after a worker tested positive. The next day, just hours after company and union officials toured the Dearborn Truck Plant to tout their safety precautions, hundreds of workers downed their tools and refused to work after hearing that at least two coworkers had tested positive.

On Tuesday, Ford was forced to close its Kansas City Assembly Plant after an active case was confirmed. UAW Local 249 officials immediately sent a message warning workers not to believe “rumors and misinformation taking place on social media,” in particular, a letter being circulated by workers that was co-signed by Ford and UAW officials saying that plants would be closed for 24 hours if a case was identified.

“The letter that was sent out in early March prior to the shutdown outlining a required 24 hour deep clean is no longer the standard required by the CDC, Federal and State agencies,” the UAW Local 249 official said.

Workers at Fiat Chrysler’s Toledo, Ohio Jeep assembly plant informed the *World Socialist Web Site* that at least one line of workers was sent home Tuesday after a worker tested positive.

“A whole team has been quarantined and four more may be next,” Johnny, a veteran worker, told the WSW. “It was first shift workers on the trim, door line and final assembly lines. All the company did was wash down the area, put out some wipes, get volunteers to fill the jobs. The UAW and management are not saying a thing. This is all coming from the workers. From the UAW, you get the same old lies and BS, like, ‘We’re working on it.’”

“The masks they are handing out are garbage. I figured out I handled 39,000 parts that have been touched by other people during the space of 12 hours and I move in and out of 150 vehicles that other people have been in during a shift. All they want is boots on the ground to reopen the plants. FCA just got a \$6.8 billion loan from the Italian government after making record profits and paying off their shareholders and executives.

“Trump has turned the Treasury Department into a piggy bank for the corporations, but there is nothing for the workers who work like dogs and are dying. We need a revolution, on the scale of the Civil War, because from every direction the workers are being raped.”

There is no law to compel the corporations to reveal the extent of infections and deaths in workplaces. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration, now led by Trump’s Labor Secretary Eugene Scalia, son of the arch-reactionary Supreme Court Justice Anthony Scalia, has given the corporations even more leeway to conceal the deadly conditions in the factories.

This underscores the need for workers to form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, in every factory and workplace. Among the tasks of these committees will be to control work hours and line speeds, guarantee protective equipment, ensure safe and comfortable working conditions, enforce regular testing, demand universal health care and guaranteed income, and ensure the distribution of information so that appropriate measures can be taken, including halting production if necessary.



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