

COVID-19 eruptions increasing in US meatpacking plants, logistics centers

Shannon Jones**10 June 2020**

Industrial and logistics centers in the United States continue to be major vectors for the spread of COVID-19, with the number of infections rising sharply in many areas of the country. This follows the abandonment by government officials from the Trump administration on down of any measures to contain the virus.

Meat processing facilities across the country remain COVID-19 hotspots. Industry executives are using Trump's executive order declaring meatpacking plants an essential industry as a license to sicken and kill workers.

In the wake of Trump's executive order, the number of cases at meatpacking plants has risen by 100 percent. As of Monday, there were reports of 20,400 infections at 216 plants in 33 states. At least 74 workers have died.

A *USA Today* report found that that a number of counties where meat processing facilities are located experienced a doubling of their COVID-19 case count in the last two weeks.

The lack of any serious safety procedures at most facilities, and the refusal of many employers, with the collusion of the unions, to provide any transparency on infections and deaths raises the urgent need for the formation of rank-and-file safety committees at all work locations to take up the defense of workers' health and lives. These committees would demand full income for laid off or sick employees, and enforce safety procedures in consultation with medical professionals.

One of the areas of the country with the most alarming spread of COVID-19 is Texas.

The weekly number of new cases has grown from 1,081 during the week ending May 24 to 1,527 over the past week, using a seven-day trailing average. The indications are that meatpacking plants and prisons are centers of COVID-19 infection in the state.

In the state of Iowa alone, some 3,000 meatpacking workers have tested positive for COVID-19, the most of any state.

According to one analysis, approximately 6,700 Tyson Foods workers in the US have contracted COVID-19. That

is more than double the number for any other company. At the same time, Tyson Foods is reinstating its strict employee attendance policy, essentially forcing workers who are sick to come to work.

Kansas meatpacking plants have been heavily impacted. Plants in the state have been linked to at least 2,767 cases and 10 deaths. A classified Kansas public health document listed the Tyson Foods plant near Garden City as having had the largest outbreak in the state, with 571 cases and one death. A total of 503 cases and four deaths have been linked to the National Beef plant in Ford County.

On Tuesday, Tyson Foods reported new COVID-19 outbreaks at two Iowa plants.

It said 591 of 2,300 employees at its Storm Lake pork processing plant tested positive along with 224 out of 1,500 workers at its beef and pork processing plant in Council Bluffs.

COVID-19 is appearing in a growing number of rural areas largely bypassed in the initial outbreak. In Utah, officials with the Bear River Health Department in the northern part of the state confirmed a major outbreak at JBS Foods in Hyrum. Friday and Saturday saw about 200 new cases each day in Hyrum following a testing clinic at the JBS facility. Total cases in Utah are heading toward 14,000.

So far, 287 workers have tested positive at the plant, which employs 1,400 and remains in partial operation. JBS has refused to close the facility, citing Trump's executive order.

The Bear River Health Department has received reports that COVID-positive and sick employees are being told to report to work at the facility. Most of the workers at the plant are immigrants from Latin America, Asia and Africa and many are not fluent in English.

Health officials in Iowa report that Bridgestone America's farm tire plant in Des Moines, which employs 1,000 workers, is continuing to operate despite at least 24 confirmed COVID-19 cases.

Also this week, two more confirmed cases were reported at General Motors' Wentzville, Missouri plant. The report was the result of an anonymous tip to local media, as GM is

generally not reporting on coronavirus cases at its plants.

Because of the nature of their work, logistics workers are also at high risk of COVID-19 infection. Two Amazon workers at a Charlotte facility tested positive for COVID-19. At least nine other Amazon workers at Charlotte area fulfillment centers have tested positive, according to the *Charlotte Observer*.

The Oregon Health Authority said it is looking into an outbreak of COVID-19 affecting five workers at Amazon's fulfillment center in Salem.

The company, with the aid of the media, is suppressing reports of infections and deaths at its facilities. In May, the attorneys general of 13 states sent letters to Amazon and its subsidiary, Whole Foods, asking for the release of data on COVID-19 cases, including a workplace by workplace breakdown, and for the company to reinstate its earlier policy of unlimited time off.

In response, Amazon doubled down on its refusal to release figures, declaring in a statement that such data "isn't particularly useful because it's relative to the size of the building and then the overall community infection rate."

Amazon's multi-billionaire CEO Jeff Bezos has touted the company's supposed concern for workers' health, with company officials escorting reporters through a model plant in Washington state. Bezos, who has grown richer by tens of billions of dollars during the pandemic crisis, is now reportedly worth \$150 billion.

An Amazon worker at a warehouse in Jeffersonville, Indiana, Jana Jumpp, and another Amazon worker in California have kept a tally of COVID cases at Amazon and Whole Foods based on independent sources. They report that as of Tuesday, 353 Whole Foods workers at 164 stores have tested positive and at least four Whole Foods employees have died, including a manager at a store in Pasadena.

As of last week, Jumpp had documented 1,079 cases of coronavirus among Amazon warehouse workers, and confirmed nine deaths. These numbers almost certainly understate the spread of the virus among Whole Foods and Amazon warehouse employees.

Three Amazon employees in New York have filed a lawsuit against the company, claiming that it has failed to follow guidelines set by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It asserts that the company has mounted only a "facade of compliance," but has failed to adequately protect workers from the virus in a number of ways, including "sloppy contact tracing" and failure to provide adequate personal protective equipment.

Package delivery services FedEx and United Parcel Service have also refused to report COVID-19 cases. Last month in Kansas, a cluster of COVID-19 cases were traced to a FedEx distribution center in Olathe. FedEx confirmed

that cases had been discovered at the facility, which employs about 200 people, but did not say how many.

A United Parcel Service facility in Tucson has been identified as the source of an outbreak, with 43 workers testing positive, according to a report issued by the local union.

Though not as widely reported as the situation in meatpacking, other types of food processing facilities have reported large numbers of COVID-19 cases.

A survey of news stories published between March 14 and June 8 found that almost 1,200 food processing workers at 60 plants had been infected, involving a wide range of companies including Kraft, Heinz, Birdseye and Campbell Soup. The most cases were reported at Steven Roberts Original Desserts in Aurora, Colorado, with 115. Ruiz Foods in Dinuba, California had 107, and Birds Eye in Darien, Wisconsin had 104.

On Sunday, Oregon health officials announced an outbreak at a Pacific Seafood processing plant in Newport, where 124 cases of coronavirus were confirmed, the largest single-day outbreak in Oregon to date. So far, the company has not released the names and addresses of infected employees, making contact tracing impossible. Local authorities say they have no legal means of forcing the company to cooperate.

The spread of the disease in industrial facilities is a tragedy not just for the workers who are exposed, but for their families and the broader community. The lack of any real oversight or control over workplace exposure means that workers are entirely at the mercy of profit-driven corporations determined to squeeze out every dime of profit at the least cost.

The abandonment by public officials at all levels of any effort to contain the COVID-19 pandemic makes it critical for workers to intervene to safeguard their health and the health of their loved ones. This cannot be entrusted to the pro-corporate unions. It requires the development of rank-and-file organizations of struggle in each workplace. The *World Socialist Web Site* encourages workers to contact us to discuss the establishment of these safety committees.



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