Around 250 workers infected with COVID-19 in three UK food processing plants

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Outbreaks of coronavirus have been reported at two food processing plants and a meat factory within the space of 24 hours, with all three having to be temporarily closed.

Two of the plants are in Wales. By Thursday, there had been 58 confirmed cases among workers at the 2 Sisters chicken factory in Llangefni on Anglesey, and 38 at Rowan Foods in Wrexham. Yesterday it was revealed that "up to 150" workers have tested positive for COVID-19 at the Kober Ltd meatpacking factory near Cleckheaton, in the local government district of Kirklees, West Yorkshire, England. It could be even higher with Huddersfield MP Barry Sheerman stating, "The figure of 150 is less than the one that was leaked to me by a high-level source, but it is still a serious outbreak…"

The plants are major suppliers to the UK food market. The 2 Sisters Food Group's Llangefni plant employs 560 people and is the UK's main supplier of supermarket chicken. It also supplies chicken to KFC. The firm produces about a third of all the poultry products eaten daily in Britain.

Rowan Foods, which employs 1,500 people in Wrexham, supplies food for supermarkets across Britain. It is owned by Oscar Meyer Quality Foods.

The Kober plant, employing more than 500 people, is owned by the Asda supermarket giant and supplies it with bacon rashers and joints.

The outbreaks underscore the criminality of the decision by the Johnson government to enforce a mass return to work, and the lack of basic safety for workers in plants that have been operating throughout the pandemic—including the three food processing facilities.

On Friday, the UK's joint biosecurity centre reduced the virus threat level from four to three despite the food processing plant outbreaks and significant increases in some areas. The official "R" value of the virus remains at the dangerously high level of between 0.7 and 0.9. In the last weeks, two of the UK regions—the North West and South West—reached an R value of 1 or over.

One of the new outbreaks is in Leicester, which has a population of over 329,000. About 25 percent of the total 2,494 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the city were reported in the last two weeks.

Well over 1,000 new cases are reported in Britain daily, with hundreds of lives lost each week.

Four meat processing plants have now been hit by COVID-19 outbreaks. While no deaths are reported among employees at 2 Sisters, Rowan Foods and Kober, three workers employed at the Cranswick plant in Barnsley, South Yorkshire, have died.

In a statement Rowan Food owners Oscar Mayer said, "Whilst we are seeing a number of cases on site, Public Health Wales support our view that there is no clear evidence to suggest that there is a spread of the virus within the site, we are seeing a reflection on site of the increases in cases within the locality."

How and why an increase in cases "locally" that is then "reflected" in the factory does not require action is not explained. But it is clear that companies, in alliance with the authorities, are concealing the extent of the spread of the virus in workplaces and the dangers to the local population.

That there was a coronavirus outbreak in Kirklees was only made public Thursday evening when Health Minister Matt Hancock praised the government for being proactive in its "local lockdowns" in "parts of Leicester" and Kirklees. He stated, "In fact, I chaired a meeting this morning of our local action committee, which is the formal process through which we make these decisions, working with local leaders, for instance, in Kirklees. And the local director of public

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health and the council are heavily involved in the response."

Hancock did not name where the outbreak was in Kirklees, but it rapidly became public knowledge after concerned residents discussed the crisis on social media.

The event further exposes the pernicious role of Labour and the trade unions, without whom companies could not operate unsafe workplaces. The main concern of Labour-run Kirklees Council and local Labour MP Tracy Brabin was that Hancock had blown their dirty secret, with the local population alerted as to the dangerous situation.

Brabin complained, "My anger is the way *we* were thrown to the wolves." Her next move was to downplay the fact that a deadly disease was rife in a local food plant declaring, "No-one in Kirklees should be concerned. Having spoken to the council they've acted very swiftly, I'm proud of them but I'm really frustrated Matt Hancock took it on himself to announce it like that."

Kirklees Council admitted it had kept the Kober outbreak from the public "because it doesn't combat the spread of the virus, compromises patient confidentiality and it could discourage businesses and organisations from coming forward in future."

There is presently not even a requirement for corporations to tell their own workforce that there is an outbreak of coronavirus!

That dozens of workers at Kober and the food processing plants were infected is no surprise, given that companies have routinely flaunted basic social distancing rules ever since the March 23 lockdown came into operation. On social media, as far back as two months ago, one local resident pointed out the lack of any enforced social distancing by Kober during shift changes. Posting a photo on Twitter of workers gathered in confined spaces next to a road, he commented, "They really just don't get it!!! Kober Ltd/Forza Foods shift change #SocialDistanacing #SocialDistancingNow."

Alan Hair gave voice to the anger of local residents at being kept in the dark. He posted a tweet Thursday reading, "So there's a #Covid_19 outbreak in 'Kirklees' but it's a secret where. No it isn't, it's half a mile from our house at Kober Ltd by Chain Bar, no surprise at all when you see them piling out en-masse at shift changes over the past months. Why were we not informed?"

He told the BBC, "We are trying to shield some family members and have been for the past 12 weeks and it's part and parcel of that that we need to know if there are local issues that could affect us actually taking the virus to people who are at risk." Another replied to Kirklees Council and Brabin, "No wonder there was an #outbreak #Kirklees unbelievable!"

The trade unions too are up to their necks in concealing the dangers facing workers. Quoted on the BBC Thursday, Paddy McNaught, a regional organiser for the Unite union, admitted—without giving figures—that coronavirus cases at the 2 Sisters chicken factory in Anglesey factory had risen "significantly" in just a few days. He added, "In fairness, the company, they have tried to work with us to provide a safe working environment, where social distancing—as best as it can—takes place."

Making a mockery of the claims of working to achieve safe working conditions, he admitted that social distancing in the plant had been "virtually impossible" and there had been the "usual" concerns from staff about "social distancing and face masks."

These developments reinforce the call made by the Socialist Equality Party for the establishment of rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace to protect workers from the spread of the virus. All such unsafe workplaces must be immediately closed until they can be made to operate safely!

Food and meat processing workers internationally face the same terrible conditions. Hundreds of new infections were reported this week in Germany, with the largest outbreak yet recorded among meatpackers at the Tönnies abattoir in Rheda-Wiedenbrück. By Thursday, more than two-thirds of meat packers there were found to be infected. Of 1,050 initial test results, 730 were positive.

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