

More than 1,500 COVID-19 infections at pork processing plant in Germany

Marianne Arens and Peter Schwarz
24 June 2020

As of Monday, 1,553 workers at the Tönnies pork processing factory in Germany have tested positive for COVID-19. This is the largest mass infection in Germany since the first case was detected five months ago.

At least twenty infected workers at the plant in Rheda-Wiedenbrück, located in the western state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), are currently being treated in local hospitals, with five in intensive care. Almost 7,000 Tönnies workers are now in quarantine. As a result of the outbreak, schools and day-care centres in the district of East Westphalia were forced to close again.

Production at the plant was suspended but only after all the meat supplies were processed. Another Tönnies slaughterhouse in Weissenfels (Saxony-Anhalt) is now ramping up production to take over slaughtering and processing operations from the closed plant.

Workers and health officials have charged that Tönnies, one of Europe's largest meat processing firms, withheld information about the spread of infections and obstructed efforts to contact trace and quarantine infected workers.

The outbreak is the result of a deliberate policy that places profits above the health and lives of workers—a policy that is supported by all parties in the Bundestag (parliament).

The scandalous conditions in the slaughterhouses have been known for years. Through service contracts and a convoluted system of subcontracting, the workers, who include large numbers of Eastern European immigrants, are brutally exploited. They stand on assembly lines for ten, twelve or more hours a day and often earn only a fraction of the statutory minimum wage after deducting agency fees, transport, and accommodation costs.

The state authorities found overcrowding, danger of building collapse, leaking roofs, mold, unsanitary facilities, rat infestation and fire protection deficiencies in the collective housing and company apartments. During the inspection of 650 accommodation facilities, where more than 5,300 people live, there were 1,900 medium and serious complaints. Necessary hygiene measures to counter the spread of the deadly disease are not possible.

The poor housing conditions are not the only breeding ground for COVID-19. The slaughterhouses and meat processing facilities have also turned into life-threatening hotspots. Of the 6,650 workers who were tested at Tönnies, just over a fifth were infected. In the cutting department, where pig halves are cut up,

two-thirds of the workers were infected. Workers in the department stand elbow-to-elbow on assembly lines. The air is constantly being cooled down and is damp. The work is physically strenuous, and workers are constantly breathing heavily and shouting, propelling droplets and even smaller aerosols far and wide.

The fact that meat processing plants are major vectors for the spread of the infection is well known around the world. In the US, 25,000 workers in the meat industry have been infected and at least 91 have died. There have also been major outbreaks in the UK and Brazil. Nevertheless, production at Tönnies continued at full speed, even after hundreds of cases were detected in several German slaughterhouses in early May. At Tönnies itself, there was also a case of COVID-19 as early as March, and six weeks ago several workers tested positive.

The politicians who are now hypocritically complaining that “the health of the workers is being played to maximize profit” (NRW state Health Minister Karl-Josef Laumann, a Christian Democrat), and shedding crocodile tears about the “exploitation of people” (Federal Labour Minister Hubertus Heil, a Social Democrat) are directly responsible for the Tönnies disaster.

With the introduction of the Hartz labour and welfare “reforms” 15 years ago, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) created the conditions for the brutal exploitation of workers in the meat industry. Now the SPD is part of a federal government that advocates and orders ruthless relaxation of safety guidelines. The capitalist parties of every stripe in the federal government, from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Free Democrats (FDP) to the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party, are all working to lift pandemic regulations and lockdowns as quickly as possible.

By re-opening schools and day-care centres, the government has made it clear to corporations like Tönnies that the interests of big business will come first, despite the continuing danger from the coronavirus. Lockdown measures have not been reintroduced in East Westphalia even though the number of new infections per 100,000 inhabitants in the Gütersloh district is 243, well above the 50 mark that the government itself had set as the threshold for a return to lockdown.

Corporate patriarch Clemens Tönnies, who made it from butcher's son to Germany's billionaire “Meat Baron” thanks to ruthless methods of exploitation, is politically well connected. He has been chairman of the supervisory board of the first league

soccer club FC Schalke 04 for 19 years, and thus enjoys a tight network of political and business relationships. His company has donated a total of €147,000 to the CDU, which heads the NRW state executive under state premier Armin Laschet.

The most prominent member of the advisory board of Tönnies Holding is Siegfried Russwurm, acting chairman of the supervisory boards of Thyssenkrupp and Voith, and a former board member of Siemens. Last week, Russwurm was nominated to be the new president of the Confederation of German Industries (BDI). Concerning the coronavirus pandemic, *Manager Magazin* quoted him saying that he wanted to work to ensure that “companies in Germany and Europe overcome the severe recession as quickly as possible” to reach the top of the world rankings.

Tönnies himself and his company have been the subject of numerous investigations—for fraud, tax evasion, price-fixing, bribery, false labelling, and video surveillance of employees, among other things—resulting in several fines. The scandalous conditions in his companies have repeatedly made headlines. But none of this has harmed the company’s rise: the Tönnies Group is Germany’s largest meatpacking firm, employing around 16,500 workers worldwide. In 2019, the group had a record revenue of €7.3 billion and a 30 percent share of Germany’s pork processing market.

The coronavirus outbreak at Tönnies provides a glimpse of conditions that are commonplace in ever-larger parts of industry and contribute to enriching a thin upper class of billionaires. Today, thousands work under similar conditions in the car and metal industries, in construction, care, catering, airports, private and public transport. They are all forced to work despite the continuing danger from coronavirus.

Although the number of COVID-19 infections is reaching new records worldwide and is also increasing again in Germany, the capitalist political parties are determined to lift all restrictions and not issue any new ones—even if this leads to an increase in infections and tens of thousands of deaths.

North Rhine-Westphalia’s state premier, Armin Laschet, who aims to succeed Angela Merkel as CDU chair and also become her successor in the Chancellor’s Office, has long been a pioneer of reopening the country. Thuringia’s state premier Bodo Ramelow, from the Left Party, was the first to repeal all binding regulations.

At the same time, the government has deployed 65 Bundeswehr soldiers, supposedly to get the situation at Tönnies under control. Although the soldiers are mainly paramedics, who carried out coronavirus tests, the deployment of military forces sets a dangerous precedent. The ruling class is preparing to violently suppress any resistance to abandoning remaining safety measures and to the social consequences of the coronavirus crisis.

Quarantine measures imposed on Tönnies employees, who often do not speak German, are being enforced with military ruthlessness. Entire rows of houses are being sealed off with construction fences. Meanwhile, State Premier Laschet has repeatedly tried to stir up anti-immigrant sentiments against the Eastern European workers. At first he claimed, without any proof, that the virus had been introduced by returning Romanians and Bulgarians.

The implications of this policy were on display last Saturday evening in Göttingen, Lower Saxony, when police violently attacked the 700 residents of a high-rise building where almost 120 people were infected and quarantined for days. About 200 residents protested when they were told they would be tested a second time and did not understand why, due to language difficulties. Three hundred police officers took action against them and used pepper spray on a massive scale, including against women and children.

Living conditions in these flats are unbearable. The apartments, some of which are occupied by families with multiple children, are only between 19 and 37 square-metres in size, according to local Mayor Rolf-Georg Köhler (SPD). Nevertheless over 200 children in the building have not been allowed to leave the house due to the quarantine.

In his novel “The Jungle,” Upton Sinclair wrote 115 years ago about the stockyards and slaughterhouses of Chicago, where many immigrants settled in the hopes of making a living in America. The Beef Trust was “the incarnation of blind and insensate Greed. It was a monster devouring with a thousand mouths, trampling with a thousand hoofs; it was the Great Butcher—it was the spirit of Capitalism made flesh.”

This is an apt description of what workers face today.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) and the World Socialist Web Site call on native born and immigrant workers in meatpacking and all other industries to join together in action committees independent of the trade unions to enforce the necessary protection of workers and the population.

Sick workers, no matter what their national origin, must receive the best possible care and the full payment of their wages. The same provision of income and medical treatment must be provided to quarantined workers.

To finance this, the wealth of billionaires such as Clemens Tönnies and his family, along with the Mafia-like subcontractors who profit from the exploitation of impoverished workers, must be expropriated. This can only be achieved based on an international and socialist programme.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact