

Unite union facilitates cover-up of COVID-19 outbreak in UK meat processing plants

Tony Robson
25 June 2020

Everything possible is being done to protect those responsible for a major outbreak of COVID-19 infections among meat processing workers in England and Wales. Unite, the largest union in the UK, is playing a central role in this conspiracy.

Based on further testing, the rate of infections among meat processing workers has surpassed those originally announced by three companies, which resulted in the temporary shutdown of affected sites at the end of last week.

At the 2 Sisters chicken factory in Llangefni, Anglesey, Wales, with a workforce of 560, the total number of workers testing positive is now 175. At Rowan Foods in Wrexham, Wales, which employs 1,500 workers, cases have risen from the 38 originally reported to 70, including family members of employees. No update has been provided in relation to the outbreak in England at Kober Ltd in Cleckheaton, West Yorkshire, which had reported at least 150 cases. This figure had been disputed as an underestimation based on leaked reports. The 2 Sisters factory is the only one of the three that remains closed until July 2, while employees self-isolate.

This is the biggest outbreak of COVID-19 in workplaces since the first case of the pandemic was recorded in the UK.

Unite has reported that it is aware of five other sites with “suspected” outbreaks but did not identify the locations. It is entering tripartite talks with the Welsh Labour government and employers designed to stem growing social anger and provide a clean bill of health to the corporations, whose criminal negligence has compromised the safety of thousands of workers and those in local communities.

The flood of empty assurances coming from Public Health Wales (PHW) and Public Health England is in inverse proportion to any measures to ensure further containment of the outbreak. The pandemic has been able

to rage precisely because these agencies, along with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), are beholden to the companies.

On April 3, police were called to workers at Rowan Foods Limited, who had staged a walkout over the unsafe conditions in the factory. In response, Rowan Foods has cited PHW to claim that the outbreak of the virus did not originate in its factory.

The three companies responsible for the industrial outbreak of COVID-19 dominate the food industry and are suppliers to leading supermarkets and fast food chains. The 2 Sisters Food Group is owned by Boporan Holdings and supplies a third of all poultry products consumed in the UK. Rowan Foods is owned by Oscar Meyer Quality Foods. Kober, which employs 500, is owned by supermarket chain Asda for which it supplies bacon rashers and joints. Asda is the British subsidiary of the US transnational, Walmart.

The exploitative and dangerous conditions in these workplaces are the basis on which the wealth of their billionaire owners has been coined. It provides a devastating indictment of the government, which designated these industries essential and which have operated throughout the pandemic under minimal safety regulations. Low pay and recourse only to Statutory Sick Pay paid at £95.85 per week have magnified the risk of the virus spreading, as workers cannot afford to go sick.

Along with other unions, Unite has been responsible for policing these conditions. Since the outbreak began, the overarching aim of Unite has been damage limitation to safeguard its collaboration with the Johnson government’s premature return to work.

Last Friday, Unite called for a crisis meeting with the Welsh government and employers over the outbreak. Labour’s health minister, Vaughan Gething, has taken up the offer and is due to meet with employers and unions this week. This is under conditions in which a third meat

processing plant in Wales, at Merthyr Tydfil, has seen an increase in infections. The Kepak meat plant had 34 cases linked to the site since April and 8 new cases in June.

In a press briefing, Gething described food producers as being “generally good” at following COVID-19 workplace regulations and said that there are very good examples of this around Wales. “We also know that the meat processing sector, operating margins can be very tight, many people are employed on fairly low pay and levels of statutory sick pay mean many people feel they have no choice but to carry on working when they are ill,” he added.

The Labour minister described the profit margins of some of the wealthiest corporations as “tight.” On Tuesday, he stated that there was no evidence of a wider community transmission and did not see the need for local lockdown measures.

The Labour Party in West Yorkshire was involved in a cover-up in relation to the outbreak at the local Asda meat processing factory. In a spat with Tory Health Minister Matt Hancock, local Labour MP Tracy Brabin said his revealing the outbreak was like being “thrown to the wolves. ...” She claimed “no-one in Kirklees should be concerned [about a coronavirus outbreak in a large local factory]. 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.”

Labour-run 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.”

The cover-up by the Labour Party and unions extends back to April with the outbreak at the Cranswick Convenience Foods meat slicing factory in Wombwell, Barnsley that claimed the lives of three workers, with nine confirmed cases. The employer, local Labour authority and the GMB union contrived to ensure that even a 48-hour closure for a deep clean did not take place.

This was publicly revealed only on June 22, in an article in the *Yorkshire Examiner*, when local Labour MPs noted that the HSE had failed to conduct a site inspection. John Healey MP confirmed that the HSE had only contacted the company via e-mail and accepted its assurances that measures had been put in place, asking, “If they didn’t do a site visit when three people died, what would it take?”

But this admission was only made following e-mails sent to Labour MPs including Healey by Leander Lupton, the partner of 55-year-old Dave Baxter, a Cranswick

employee, who died of the virus on April 19. Ms Lupton told the newspaper, “They have put measures in place only since there have been deaths and hospital admissions. People don’t speak up because they’re scared for their jobs.”

Meat processing factories across the world have become a breeding ground for the virus and working in them a potential death sentence for workers in the US, Brazil, France, and Germany. They have become major hotspots because workers are crammed in on assembly lines working up to 12 hours a day with line speeds and air conditioning systems—in which air is constantly cooled and circulated—determined by corporate interests, not workers’ safety.

Unite’s collaboration with the corporations and the Johnson government is based on supporting the “national interest.” This makes future employment and terms and conditions conditional on the increased drive for profitability and competitiveness.

The unions use any minor concession from the companies to justify their slavish support for corporate interests over workers’ rights. Unite was full of praise for 2 Sisters Food Group because it agreed to full pay for workers at its Llangefni factory during the two weeks of self-isolation.

The COVID-19 outbreak in the meat processing factories underscores the need for independent rank -and-file committees linking the fight for workplace safety with a broader restructuring of the economy—to end the stranglehold exerted by the corporate and financial elite over every aspect of life, including the right to life itself.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact