”I can get another job. I can’t get another life”

Food processing plants in Ohio and New York hit with outbreaks

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The number of workers in food processing plants infected with coronavirus continues to grow. More than 230 workers at a Dole Foods salad processing plant in Springfield, Ohio, have now tested positive for COVID-19. Last week, 82 workers or 46 percent of the workforce also tested positive at Champlain Valley Specialty of NY, a company that packages sliced apples in upstate New York.

Dole Foods as well as county and State of Ohio health officials have refused to close the plant despite the fact that more than a quarter of the plant’s 829 workers have now tested positive. Dole management has known for a long time that COVID-19 was spreading among its employees. The first positive case was back in April. Yet the company failed to close and thoroughly clean the plant to prevent the spread of the virus.

On Saturday, June 20, the health officials organized the testing of everyone at the plant. Infected workers continued to work while their test results were pending. Barry Scuttles, who works at the plant, told local TV station WHIO-TV, “The proper thing to do was shut the place down until all the tests came back. Keep all the positives at home and then bring the other workers back.” Scuttles said he personally had to inform three co-workers that they were positive and pull them from the line.

In a statement, Dole rejected closing, citing conversations with county health officials that “the plant is not likely the source of transmission and closure is not warranted.” Such an absurd statement exposes the contempt of these giant corporations for the working class. Regardless of where the source of transmission began, the plant is now a vector for the transmission of the disease. To ignore that the virus is spreading between workers is not just neglect but an act of corporate murder.

Many workers are worried about safety but are concerned about speaking out. The State of Ohio has now declared three ZIP codes around the plant as hot spots for virus. Scuttles told WHIO-TV “Corporate America is worried about money. They’re not worried about their workers. I can get another job. I can’t get another life.”

Workers are now reportedly being forced to work 12-hour shifts to make up for the time lost by infected employees missing work.

This outbreak has brought the number of confirmed cases in Clark County up to 641 with eight deaths as of writing. On June 5, the number of confirmed cases was only 272. By June 23, the county health department had linked 281 cases to the outbreak at the plant. This means that three-quarters of all new cases in the past three weeks were related to the Dole plant.

Additionally, the average age of the infected fell from 42.7 to 38 during the course of this period. The fact that the virus has spread so rapidly among younger people is a testament to the vulnerability of all age groups. The myth that young people do not have to worry about the virus has thoroughly unraveled.

In a similar event, 82 workers tested positive last week at Champlain Valley Specialty of NY in Oswego, New York, just north of Syracuse on Lake Ontario.

Oswego County is preparing, along with much of upstate and western New York, to move on to Phase 4 of reopening in the coming weeks. This phase marks a near-complete reopening of economic and school activity with some minor caveats for social distancing.

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The Oswego plant has been found to have spread the virus to two other factories in the area. Thirty-seven workers tested positive at an aluminum plant in Montgomery County, New York, and 4 out of 18 workers were confirmed positive at an onion farm in central New York. The names of the factory and the farm were not released by health officials.

Workers from both the apple and aluminum factories are known to live in Oneida County, and are believed to have spread the virus through there.

The spread of the virus from factory to factory through different counties raises serious questions about the validity of claims that certain areas are safe to reopen while the pandemic is continuing in others. While Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo has claimed that the outbreak has shown the effectiveness of the state's contact-tracing program, what is more clearly shown is that no part of the state is truly safe and free from the virus.

The fact that food processing plants are major centers of infection should not be a surprise. Dozens to hundreds of workers are crammed into factories with little to no social distancing and inadequate protective measures. Workers typically work in enclosed, refrigerated areas that act as perfect grounds for the virus to thrive and transmit.

The dangerous conditions have provoked a series of strikes by fruit and nut pickers and food processing workers in Yakima Valley, Washington; Wasco, California; and other locations. Migrant workers who live and travel in cramped quarters and migrate from state to state to follow the seasonal harvests can also take the disease with them.

A 2012 report by the Food Chain Workers Alliance details the horrid conditions that these workers face. Reviewing more than 700 surveys and interviews, the study found that 10 percent of food workers work more than 10 hours a day and nearly half worked more than one job to make ends meet. Eighty-one percent reported that their employer did not provide adequate safety training, and 58 percent lack any health coverage.

The median wage for food processing workers in the United States is $13.24 an hour, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. For a family of four, this is barely enough to rise above the national poverty level of $26,200.

The vulnerability of food processing workers and the persistence of outbreaks in processing facilities demonstrates the anti-scientific and murderous character of the back-to-work drive. What is exposed is the incompatibility of the profit system with public health. All non-essential and sick workers could be provided with full pay and all essential workers could be provided with the protective equipment they require. The money exists, but only for the benefit of the capitalists. The Trump administration and the congressional Democrats and Republicans handed over trillions to bail out the banks and corporations; yet hardly a penny can be spared to save the lives of thousands.

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