

# COVID-19 increase at UK's 2 Sisters, Rowan and Kober meat processing factories

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The number of workers testing positive for COVID-19 at three meat processing factories at the centre of the biggest industrial outbreak of the virus in the UK continues to rise, while suppressed information regarding infections at other companies has begun to surface.

The 2 Sisters chicken factory in Llangefni, Anglesey, Wales, with a workforce of 560, reported an increase from 175 to 216 cases, while at Rowan Foods, in Wrexham, Wales, which employs 1,500, saw an increase from 70 to 237 cases. At the Kober Ltd meat processing plant in Kirklees, West Yorkshire, confirmed cases among its 1,500 workers increased from 150 to 165. The total number of 618 cases is well above the 250 originally reported when the sites were temporarily closed less than two weeks ago. However, the 2 Sisters factory remains the only one closed until July 2.

George Eustice, the Conservative government's Environment Secretary, has pointed to the absence of social distancing in the workplace communal areas and travelling to and from work as contributory factors. "We suspect that these outbreaks might have been linked either to canteens or potentially car sharing arrangements in those plants," he said.

However, Professor Chris Elliot of the Institute for Global Food Security at Belfast's Queen University told the BBC, "Our meat industry very much relies upon migrant workers, particularly from east Europe. There is something very specific about these three facilities in the UK and the big facility in Germany. I think it's actually accommodation sharing because often with migrant workers you'll have four, six, eight or ten sharing a house."

He added that conditions inside the factory were "fantastic" for the viruses because it was cold and damp, and workers operate in close proximity to one another.

Most telling was the comparison with Germany where the rate of infection has been linked to the overcrowded

and unsanitary housing conditions in which migrant workers from Romania and Bulgaria are forced to live. Such conditions also prevail in the UK, with migrant workers representing a significant section of the workforce and many living in a House with Multi Occupancy (HMO). This is defined as a property which is rented by at least three people not from the same household and who share a kitchen, toilet and bathroom. According to recent figures, European Union nationals make up 69 percent of workers in meat processing in the UK.

The factors identified as key to the spread of the virus demonstrate that the pandemic's spread is bound up with economic and social conditions. Inadequate and unsafe forms of transport, poor working conditions and rundown accommodation are class issues bound up with the wealth extraction demanded by capitalism. The three companies at the centre of the UK outbreak hold a dominant position within the food industry and supply major supermarkets and fast food chains.

Public Health Wales (PHW) has reported that 300 workers have failed to present for testing at Rowan Foods and the Isle of Anglesey County Council has appealed for workers not yet tested at the 2 Sister Factory to come forward. The statements by the authorities are full of empty assurances that workplace conditions are under review, but this is disproven by the lengths taken to absolve the companies of any responsibility.

Rowan Foods and PHW have stated that there is no evidence that the workplace is the source of the outbreak. But this is a moot point under conditions in which it has been revealed as a major vector for the virus. Workers even staged a walkout on April 3 against unsafe conditions, over a month before the outbreak was announced.

The meat processing industry is a hot spot for COVID-19 in country after country. The outbreak in the

UK coincides with a massive outbreak in Germany at Tonnies, with over 1,500 reported cases. In the US, the meatpacking industry continues to be the largest spreader of COVID-19, with more than 24,000 workers infected and 91 deaths.

Germany's *Die Welt* (DW) reported that similar conditions exist across EU member states including Belgium, France, Ireland, Spain, Poland and the Netherlands. "Ireland's meat industry was the second-worst hit after Germany, DW said. "A total of 950 laborers contracted COVID-19 at 19 plants. At some sites, one-fourth of the entire workforce fell ill. Yet despite such outbreaks, none of the Irish plants were shut down."

The DW article cites a report from the European Federation of Trade Unions in the Food, Agriculture and Tourism sectors (EFFAT) warning that "appalling working, employment and housing conditions" affect "thousands of meat workers in many countries across Europe."

These conditions are facilitated by labour hire firms, which employ workers on low pay and insecure contracts to provide major corporations with a supply of workers with few or no rights.

Whatever lip service is paid to improving the conditions of migrant workers, the calls by trade unions for tighter regulations—while working hand in glove with employers and governments—aim to promote a nationalist agenda and to facilitate a deeper collaboration between the unions and corporations against a unified opposition from within the working class.

Both native born and migrant workers are up against a rapacious profit drive by the corporations, as revealed by further cases of infection in other parts of the UK meat processing industry.

At the Kepak in Methr Tydvil, South Wales, 101 cases of COVID-19 were confirmed out of 810 tested last Saturday, bringing the total from April to 130. At the Tulip Ltd pork processing plant in Tipton, West Midlands, the company confirmed three workers had tested positive and a further 16 employees had been asked to self-isolate at home. This followed testing of 104 staff at the plant which employs 640 workers and has reported 35 cases since March. ABP Food Group in the west of England has reported eight current cases and four suspected cases at its plant in Shrewsbury, which employs 700, and two at its Ellesmere plant with a similar workforce. This brings total cases at the two plants to 74 since the start of the pandemic.

No confidence can be placed in the multi-agency

response tasked with managing the outbreaks. Public Health England, like its Welsh counterpart, issued a pro forma statement explaining how cooperative employers are being used to justify inaction in terms of site closures or additional measures to prevent community transmission.

The cover-up would not be complete without the trade unions. Unite has been central in maintaining secrecy over the extent of the outbreaks and, along with other unions, drew up a guidance with the Welsh government published June 26 to supposedly resolve safety problems in the meat and food industry. On all issues related to social distancing, which would obligate the companies to reduce line speeds, stagger shifts or limit the number of workers in the factory, the guidance is advisory. It proposes no improvements in the housing conditions of migrant workers but states that they should be regimented in their HMOs in accordance with their working cohort.

Rowan Foods has rejected the guidance that employees self-isolating should not suffer any financial detriment and has refused to ensure full pay. Unite Regional Officer Brian Troake reported that calls to slow the assembly lines to allow social distancing have fallen on "deaf ears," with productivity increased by 40 percent during the pandemic.

The Socialist Equality Party urges workers to read and circulate the statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International for an international working class response to the pandemic, which insists, "The fight against the pandemic is not only, or even primarily, a medical issue. It is, above all, a matter of social and political struggle."



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