

Meat processing plants spread the coronavirus in North Carolina

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Health officials reported 1,629 new cases of COVID-19 in North Carolina on Wednesday, after a record 1,843 new cases reported the day before. A total of at least 1,391 have died from the virus, and 912 people are currently in the hospital fighting for their lives.

The situation in the state has worsened following the relaxation of restrictions on social gatherings and business operations in late May, but there are two reasons why the state has not seen the dramatic increases observed in other states that have reopened. First, many of the state's meat and poultry processing plants never closed in the first place. Second, in the rural counties where meat and poultry facilities are located, under-testing has concealed the magnitude of the crisis.

While Democratic Governor Roy Cooper has so far resisted the pressure of the Republican-led legislature to allow bars and gyms to reopen, both the Democratic and Republican parties are complicit in permitting the meat and poultry industries in the state to endanger the lives of millions of workers with impunity.

The dangers presented by meatpacking plants are well documented. The online edition of *Science*, which is published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, spoke with several experts, including Gwenan Knight from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, who discussed some possible reasons behind the so-called “superspreading events” in the past few months, in which large numbers of people have been infected with COVID-19 at an alarmingly rapid rate.

Such superspreading events tend to involve enclosed indoor spaces where people are packed closely together. Meatpacking facilities fall into this category. Moreover, low temperatures in the plants also likely

help keep the virus active for a longer period of time.

According to Knight, the fact that meatpacking plants are very loud places where workers have to shout to communicate may also play a role. Since the coronavirus can be spread by speaking, more virus is most likely expelled, and at a faster rate of speed, when people speak loudly.

However, private profit, not science, has driven the response of the ruling class to the immense dangers presented by the continued operation of such facilities.

President Trump himself intervened on April 28 to prevent the closure of meatpacking plants, signing an executive order classifying the plants as “critical infrastructure” under the Defense Production Act.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* insisted at the time, this order was “squarely aimed not at securing the food supply chain or defending workers’ safety, but rather at shielding the profits of the giant food processing conglomerates and protecting them from the impact of lawsuits from sickened workers.”

There are 35,000 workers employed in the meat and poultry industry in North Carolina, which has continuously ranked among the top five US producers of chickens and hogs in the country. According to the Food & Environment Reporting Network (FERN), there have been more outbreaks at North Carolina processing plants than in any other state.

Some individual meat and poultry plants employ more than 4,000 workers, and whenever a single worker in one of these facilities unknowingly becomes infected it places the health and lives of thousands of other workers in immediate danger.

However, the impact of the reckless operation of these facilities extends well beyond the workplace itself. According to an investigative report published by the *Raleigh News & Observer*, the infection rates are

highest in the zip codes of counties with significant plant outbreaks.

According to the report, “virus cases rose by nearly 600% on average” from May 1 to June 11 in the 13 ZIP codes closest to processing plants in seven North Carolina counties where outbreaks had occurred. “In contrast,” the article points out, “the number of cases statewide in the same time frame rose by 262%.”

Moreover, further highlighting the potential for the spread of the virus, not all meat and poultry workers reside in the same ZIP codes where the outbreaks have occurred.

As the report points out, meat and poultry processing facilities are not the only source of outbreaks in the state. Outbreaks in urban areas have been linked with nursing homes, prisons, jails and construction sites. However, in spite of the fact that these areas—including Wake, Durham and Mecklenburg counties—tend to be more densely populated, the infection rate there is lower than it is in rural areas where most of the meat and poultry facilities are located.

Although only 2,000 processing plant workers have reportedly tested positive for the virus, this number doubtless represents a vast undercounting of the number of cases at the facilities themselves.

The inadequacy of coronavirus testing in rural outbreak areas was highlighted in a report by *ProPublica*, which documented how at least one Tyson Foods facility in Wilkesboro, North Carolina attempted to wrest control of coronavirus testing from the county health department.

According to the report, Rachel Willard, the county health director in Wilkesboro, “watched with alarm as COVID-19 cases rolled in from the Tyson Foods chicken plant in the center of town.” For very different reasons, Tyson too was alarmed and “hired a private company to take over testing.”

At that point, the report recounts, “the information suddenly slowed to a trickle.” Tyson stopped testing in May, but, “nearly a week” later, “the county health agency had received less than 20% of the results.” The agency was prevented from carrying out comprehensive contact tracing because the information that the company did provide “was missing phone numbers and other data,” making it impossible to track down and speak with workers who tested positive for the virus.

As meat and poultry facilities have done their best to

conceal the extent of the crisis in the industry in North Carolina, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), which knows exactly which plants have led to outbreaks, has refused to release this information to the public. Democratic Governor Roy Cooper is complicit in this effort.

In response, a coalition of media outlets is now suing both DHHS and Governor Cooper in response to their failure to provide public records relating to the outbreaks as required by law. On June 17, a judge ordered the parties to enter mediation in mid-July.

It is time to take the decisions about how to fight the coronavirus pandemic out of the hands of the ruling elite. Meat and poultry workers in North Carolina and around the country must join their class brothers and sisters in the auto industry and build rank-and-file committees to fight for safe and sanitary working conditions in their own workplaces and to fight for a socialist alternative, guided by science, to the criminal mishandling of the pandemic by the capitalist class. We urge all workers who want to fight for such an alternative to contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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