

COVID-19 outbreak surges among Michigan farm workers in rural counties

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Over 200 Michigan farm workers tested positive for the COVID-19 virus during the last ten days of June. The surge of positive cases among workers emerged in the three mostly rural counties of Lapeer, Branch and Oceana. A large majority of these seasonal and migrant farm workers are from Mexico and Central American countries.

The outbreak in southwestern Branch County occurred at Maroa Farms in Coldwater, Michigan, where at least 57 workers tested positive, many of whom are working under the H-2A temporary visa program. Farm workers under this program are particularly vulnerable, as they generally rely on their employers for housing, transportation to the farms, and things such as food and medical assistance.

In Oceana County, along Michigan's west coast, 67 workers at Todd Greiner Farms in Hart, Michigan, also tested positive for the virus. A worker at the farm explained to Michigan Radio that workers were told they would receive masks each day that had been used the day before and been washed. When the worker inquired about the safety of this practice, she was refused further work on the farm. This type of practice has no doubt been repeated thousands of times at the many farms across the United States.

Additional reports from health officials indicate that a total of 102 farm and manufacturing workers in Oceana County have also recently tested positive, among five different facilities in the county. At least 183 positive test cases have been confirmed among farm workers in the county since May 1, traced to at least two agriculture outbreaks in the area.

Health officials in Lapeer County, east of Flint, Michigan, revealed that 33 migrant workers at three different farms tested positive as well.

The outbreaks follow a steady increase in positive

tests among this heavily exploited section of the working class, in both Michigan and nationally. The extent of the outbreaks are undoubtedly underreported due to lack of testing, which is often left up to the farms themselves to administer. Pero Family Farms in Benton Harbor, Michigan, for instance, shut down production for two weeks in April to be sanitized after positive tests, but very little information exists on the extent of infections among the workers.

At least 19 migrant employees of a construction company recently tested positive after coming to Michigan to help with relief work related to recent catastrophic flooding in mid-Michigan and staying in a Bay County hotel.

The spike in cases among migrant workers also comes despite an executive order by Governor Gretchen Whitmer to supposedly protect farm workers—deemed “essential workers” during the pandemic—from the threat of exposure to the coronavirus.

The executive order, issued only on June 1 and lasting for only one month, required owners and operators of employer-provided migrant housing licensed by the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to create a COVID-19 response plan, provide personal protective equipment for their workers, keeping beds six feet apart at housing sites, and provide isolated housing and medical care for those who become infected.

The farm employers and county health officials involved with the outbreaks claim they were complying with these orders, essentially attempting to shift the blame onto the workers themselves, implying they must have acquired the virus outside of the farm and housing facilities.

The conditions facing farm workers are notoriously

exploitive, and undoubtedly the driving factor in leaving workers vulnerable to conditions where they could contract the coronavirus. Most of the counties in Michigan where the coronavirus is now surging, as in many other places around the country, are in rural areas where agricultural and manufacturing work is centered.

According to the Michigan Interagency Migrant Services Committee, nearly 95,000 migrant and seasonal workers come to the state annually. Aside from temporary immigrant workers, some farms also use domestic workers. Many often travel to Michigan from Florida and Texas, two states currently facing a resurgence of the virus. In the blueberry season, workers often come from Georgia and New Jersey, which have also been hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 surge in recent weeks. Forty-six crops are harvested in Michigan by hand—from asparagus in April at the beginning of the season, to apples in October, when the season ends.

Reports estimate that the state’s fruits and vegetables provide at least \$1.4 billion in economic impact for the state.

To carry out this work approximately 900 migrant housing sites are licensed in the Lower Peninsula, including 4,500 living units with a capacity for 25,000 people, according to the Michigan Department of Agricultural and Rural Development. There is often only 1 bathroom for every 15 people at these sites.

Approximately 70 percent of farm workers are undocumented, according to Farmworker Justice. They are often afraid to speak up about working conditions due to fears of retaliation and possible deportation.

To take one example from 2018, at Four Star Greenhouse in southeastern Monroe County, according to a recent report on Michigan Radio, workers were reportedly working up to 70 hours per week, under difficult living conditions. When they complained about not receiving pay, they were set up in a sting operation and deported back to Mexico. Over two years later, these workers have still not received their wages for hundreds of hours of work, according to the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center.

There are also ongoing medical issues associated with farm workers that were prevalent even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Many workers have preexisting medical conditions, especially older workers facing prolonged exposure to pesticides and chronic lung

conditions. Obesity, diabetes, asthma and cardiovascular problems are also prevalent due to poor working and living conditions.

The average life expectancy of a farm worker is only a short 49 years. This was the average general life expectancy in the US more than a century ago in 1900. According to Teresa Hendricks of Migrant Legal Aid, workers often work 90 to 100 hours a week in the peak season and do not have time to go to the doctor, which would be an even bigger problem were they to contract COVID-19.

The outbreak in Michigan also reflects a broader process of abuse and exploitation involving farm workers. As the WSWS recently noted, “Farm work is an industry of abject poverty and debt, racism and sexual harassment, long hours of stoop labor in the fields, abuse from bosses, and the denial of basic labor and human rights protections. In such cruel conditions, it is impossible to imagine that any genuine care could be provided to prevent the spread of the coronavirus from a ruling state that has carved out such an inhuman existence for this underclass of laborers and is doing little to protect the working class as whole as it pushed to reopen the US economy.”

Farm workers also continue to be the target of the Trump administration’s war on immigrants, most recently in the denial of stimulus checks to US citizens married to undocumented immigrants and the authorization of cuts in farm worker pay.

To combat these conditions, it is critical that farm workers establish rank-and-file safety committees and take the fight for decent working and living conditions into their own hands. We urge farm workers to contact us, the WSWS will assist farm workers and other workers in establishing such committees.



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