

Worker at German meat processing plant dismissed for sharing critical video

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The mass infection at the Tönnies meat processing factory in North Rhine-Westphalian (NRW), where over 1,500 workers became infected with COVID-19, has become a symbol of the ruthlessness with which employers and politicians are exposing the working class to the risk of the pandemic.

A video was made public early on showing how protection against the coronavirus at the Tönnies plant in Rheda-Wiedenbrück was being disregarded. Now the whistle-blower who shared the video is having to fight for her job in court.

“Thousands of people are all sitting around one table,” the worker said. “That’s Tönnies. How can you protect yourself here?” The video that circulated on the internet with this comment has circulated around the world. It shows a view into a canteen, where hundreds of employees sit and eat close to each other at the tables: Keeping their distance is impossible.

The video was taken by the employee of a catering company that runs the canteen at Tönnies. In the meantime, the worker has been banned from the factory, sacked without notice, and is currently fighting for her job at the Bielefeld Labour Court.

This treatment of a courageous worker, who should have received a prize as a whistle-blower, is of a piece with the actions of employers and politicians of all stripes. To keep business going and make a profit again, they are prepared to do anything, covering up and playing down the extent and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in factories and businesses.

At the same time, the pandemic is running out of control worldwide, and the number of new infections is also rising again in Germany, where the total number of people infected with coronavirus is approaching the 200,000 mark. On Sunday, 196,335 cases of COVID-19 were officially registered, although the

number of unreported cases is high because there is still little testing.

More than 9,000 people have died of the virus so far, 21 of them in the district of Gütersloh, where Tönnies is located. Almost 500 people in this district are still ill, with incalculable consequences for their entire lives. Three of them are still being given artificial respiration in various hospitals.

More and more children and young people are also becoming ill with COVID-19. Although over 80 percent of those who die of coronavirus are senior citizens over 70, they make up only 20 percent of the number of people who fall ill. Since the beginning of June, one fifth of all those who fall ill are children and young people in the age group from 0 to 19 years old. This is related to the fact that schools and day-care centres have reopened under unsafe conditions.

Last week, the number of new infections in Germany rose by almost 40 percent compared to the previous week. An analysis by the *Guardian*, based on data from Oxford University, puts Germany among the 10 countries where a second wave of infection is feared and expected.

Above all, people who work and live in precarious conditions are those being affected. The coronavirus outbreaks of recent weeks in high-rise buildings in Göttingen, Magdeburg and several housing estates in Berlin bear witness to this.

Politicians and the authorities are reacting to this by quarantining people out of sight, suppressing information and keeping quiet. The daily news hardly reports such outbreaks, whereas every relaxation of the protective measures and the opening up of holiday areas is extensively celebrated.

The latest statements by Armin Laschet (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), NRW state premier, are also

significant. At his press conference on June 30 he admitted he had relied on the principle that companies would take “personal responsibility.” In other words, he left it up to the employers whether and how they protected their employees from COVID-19.

Laschet repeated his absurd assertion that the lifting of the lockdown and the opening of businesses in Germany had not provoked a new outbreak of the infection, but that the infections had mainly been brought in from abroad, mostly by returning holidaymakers.

Laschet emphasized that the NRW state government would decide on the reopening of Tönnies “according to regulatory actions.” The time for cooperation was over, he said. “We will now proceed strictly according to law and order”—which only suggests that law and order had not been applied previously.

The Tönnies scandal has not only exposed the CDU and the close ties between the state government and the meat baron, but also the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Former SPD leader and federal economics minister Sigmar Gabriel was on the payroll of Clemens Tönnies as an adviser from March to May 2020. He is said to have received €10,000 per month plus daily payments and expenses.

During his time as economics minister, Gabriel had described the operation of notorious sub-contractors—and especially the conditions at Tönnies!—as a “disgrace for Germany.” But he is suspected of having held a protective hand over the slaughterhouse giant even back then.

Bild-Zeitung quoted a letter by Robert Tönnies, nephew of the company boss and co-owner of the company. In it, he accuses Gabriel of having saved the meat company from a million-euro fine imposed by the Federal Cartel Office, which is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Economics. In the letter, Robert Tönnies asks whether Gabriel’s fee can be understood as “retrospective reward for advantages enjoyed by the company during the time of his government activity.” Gabriel categorically denies the accusation.

Meanwhile, in East Westphalia, Tönnies and the media are trying to play down the conditions that led to the mass illnesses. The video by the caterer, it is said, was already in circulation on March 28, and not in April, under conditions of general lockdown.

What a pathetic argument! It had been known at the

latest since the end of February that the highly contagious pandemic was also raging in the country and spreading at breakneck speed. The curve of infection cases also rose exponentially in Germany. The horrific images from the overcrowded hospitals in northern Italy had been circulating since mid-March at the latest, and on March 22, the state of NRW issued a decree that a minimum distance of 1.5 metres must be maintained at workplaces as well.

Several Romanian workers have confirmed in a film by broadcaster ntv.de that they were unable to maintain such a distance at Tönnies, even during the pandemic. One worker told his family that he had to work even when he was already sick. Another former Tönnies worker described how cramped the factory was until the very end: “In a space of only two metres, four of us stood at the conveyor belt,” she reported.



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