

UK meat processing factories involved in COVID-19 outbreak back up and running

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8 July 2020

The 2 Sisters Food Group (2SFG) chicken factory on the island of Anglesey, North Wales is the last of three meat processing companies involved in the largest industrial outbreak of COVID-19 in the UK to restart production.

The multi-millionaire owner of 2SFG, Ranjit Boparan, now portrays himself as a responsible owner, and the decision to suspend production for a fortnight ending July 3 as a grand gesture and an “opportunity to supplement our existing control measures.”

The implication is that the previous safety measures were insufficient, rather than essentially non-existent. But the company knows it will not face any legal action or be forced to implement any safety measures that might impede its efforts to maximise profit.

The first reported case of COVID-19 at the chicken factory was on May 28. It spread unchecked before the factory was finally forced to close on June 18 after the number of infections had reached 58. Subsequent testing has seen the total climb to 216—nearly half the workforce.

Employees told Wales Live they had been forced to work in a climate of fear before the decision was belatedly taken to suspend production. “We could see people around us catching it and going off ill, and we had to carry on, scared to breathe at times, knowing it was in the air around us,” one said.

Another said they felt like “cannon fodder.” While 2 metre social distancing applied to corridors and the canteen it did not apply to the factory floor. Protective visors had holes cut into them to prevent them steaming up.

The outbreak constituted a far wider threat to the whole island, with a population of 70,000 people. The Welsh government’s planned reopening of schools announced for June 29 had to be cancelled locally.

However, any further lockdowns have been resisted in Anglesey, as in all other areas hit by an outbreak of the virus in the meat processing industry.

All the agencies tasked with responding to the emergency—local health bodies, councils, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and the trade unions—have instead worked to conceal the criminality of the corporations so it does not interfere with the premature re-opening of the economy by the Johnson government.

The HSE’s monitoring of the situation and new safety measures implemented at the 2 Sisters site, even as production is ramped up, are no guarantee of workers’ safety. Hundreds of workers have been infected without the HSE serving a single prohibition notice.

According to media reports, the company has implemented 30 additional safety measures which include full “opposite” and “side-by-side” screening, teams managed in “bubbles”, and CCTV surveillance of potential high traffic areas. But there has been no suggestion of a re-engineering of the ventilation system, which has been identified as a distributor of the virus in cold and damp factory settings. Neither is there any reference to the controlling of line speeds to ensure social distancing.

Another significant factor identified in the spread of the virus was the overcrowded housing of predominantly migrant workers who work in the meat processing plants. The recommendations drawn up for the meat processing industry by the Welsh Labour government—together with the unions—did not propose rehousing these workers in decent accommodation. Rather it suggested that workers’ living arrangements should conform to their “working cohort” within the factory.

The promise by the Unite union that “no stone would

be left unturned” over safety improvements has proved to be a fraud. The union has instead provided 2 Sisters with a clean bill of health. “The company have recognised that they need the help of their staff in getting back to business,” said Paddy McNaught, Unite’s regional organiser. “They’ve been honest and open with us as we worked to put new procedures in place.”

On the local community based Facebook page, “Anglesey Mon News,” the announcement of the reopening of the 2 Sisters site received many angry responses from locals, including: “As usual ££££££ comes first”, “Owners are greedy, they don’t give a toss about the staff. They are only a number,” and “Time to get out of Anglesey, before it kicks off again.”

The pleas and entreaties by Unite for a new era of corporate responsibility are directed against a growing recognition among workers that their interests are incompatible with the profit drive of the corporations.

At Rowan Foods in Wrexham—the other meat processing plant in North Wales where the virus has swept through the workforce—talks between Unite and the company have broken down.

The company has refused even to pay any more than the weekly Statutory Sick Pay of £95 per week for workers having to self-isolate, and there are reports that workers have continued to work while awaiting their tests results. A petition circulating to demand the temporary closure of the site states:

“Management are plucking people off the lines as they get notifications of positive results, but everyone is still working alongside these people until they are removed. So even staff that were tested Monday that came back negative have still been in contact with people who have tested positive later in the week.”

The latest figure on the total number of COVID-19 infections at Rowan Foods is 283, around a fifth of the workforce. In its defence, Rowan Foods was able to cite an HSE statement of early March that the safety measures it had in place were “successful”, Public Health Wales’s agreement that there is no evidence the workplace is the source of the outbreak, and the Welsh government’s decision not to use its powers to close the plant. “We have no serious issues which need addressing and we continue to comply with the law,” a company spokesman said.

The lack of enforcement is mirrored at the Kepak pork plant in Merthyr Tydfil, South Wales. The company has one in eight of its workforce infected based on recent testing, a total of 130. It has continued operating, stating that it is cooperating with the HSE. The Welsh government has not introduced any local lockdown measures even though the town has a weekly infection rate of 179 per 100,000 people. This is higher than Leicester in England, which has 141 per 100,000, where local lockdown measures are in place. Merthyr, the former mining town, is second in Wales for COVID-19 death rates, with 108 per 100,000 people.

In England, a further outbreak of COVID-19 has been reported at another meat processing plant owned by the major supermarket chain, Asda. On July 2, Forza Foods confirmed that 17 workers had tested positive for the virus at its site in Normanton, West Yorkshire, which supplies sliced and cooked meat. Asda was at the centre of the original outbreak in meat processing plants with its Kober plant in nearby Cleckheaton, which was temporarily closed, with 165 reported cases.

No action has been taken to close the Normanton site on the pretext that the confirmed cases were from the same shift. Around 300 employees have been offered tests or the option to self-isolate at home out of a workforce of 1,200. This is with the seal of approval of the local authority and the HSE.

The past few weeks have demonstrated that further outbreaks are inevitable in the meat processing industry and that they will invariably be followed by cover-ups. This is an international phenomenon, proving that the most significant “super-spreaders” of the virus are the brutal methods of exploitation employed by the corporations. The fight against the pandemic requires a root and branch transformation of society, based upon the mobilisation of the working class and the fight for socialism.



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