

Tönnies meat-processing plant in Germany restarted despite ongoing danger from COVID-19

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On Friday, meat processing started again at the Tönnies plant following the slaughter the previous day of 8,000 pigs in Rheda-Wiedenbrück in North Rhine-Westphalia.

Initially, the local authorities have permitted the processing of up to 10,000 pigs a day. The meat-processing area is where two out of three workers had become infected with COVID-19 until the shutdown on June 20. In the largest coronavirus outbreak in Germany, 1,553 workers tested positive at that time.

This is also a highly dangerous area of work worldwide. In the US alone, more than 30,000 meat packers have been infected and at least 100 have died. Workers conducted a wildcat strike at the JBS beef processing plant in Greeley, Colorado, on July 10, as reported on the *World Socialist Web Site*. Two-hundred and eighty-seven workers at the facility had tested positive, and eight have died of COVID-19 so far.

In Rheda-Wiedenbrück, along with the district of Gütersloh where it is located, 244 people are still registered as sick due to the coronavirus and one person is on artificial respiration in the intensive care unit. The danger is by no means over.

Meanwhile, more and more scientists are warning against taking the pandemic lightly and describing it in terms used by the far-right Alternative for Germany as “no worse than flu.” One in five of those infected with COVID-19 faces serious complications, and 5 percent end up being “critical,” which can lead to artificial respiration and easily to death. SARS-CoV-2 can cause complications even after weeks and can lead to severe secondary illnesses.

The new “hygiene concept” at Tönnies, which has now been approved by the authorities, provides for

additional Plexiglas walls, new air filters and better controls for the meat-processing staff. However, the main causes that have encouraged the coronavirus outbreak have not been eliminated in any way.

Nothing changes in the hard work and long hours of the precariously employed workers, who have to butcher and pack the animals at freezing temperatures while standing. Conditions are very noisy, necessitating the workers having to shout to make themselves understood. The strenuous work leads to deep breathing in and out, expelling aerosols. It is precisely these harsh conditions that are the best breeding ground for new superspreading events.

The *Haller Kreisblatt* reports two Polish workers saying that Tönnies had demanded “the hardest physical work” from them. Among other things, they had worked “in the so-called freezer department, dispatching large blocks of meat. Cartons weighing 10 to 30 kilogrammes are loaded there—even overhead and at very high speed. ... Some people can’t stand it for two hours, hardly anyone can manage a year.”

These workers reported a monthly wage of about €1,300 net, from which €150 was deducted for accommodation. They live with eight people in a three-room apartment.

“One of them had coronavirus,” the report goes on to say. “He was not isolated. “He stayed in the shared accommodation.” No one had looked after the patient, not even after repeated calls to a government agency and the ambulance. Finally, the workers were told “that the infected person would only be taken when he coughed up blood. There is supposedly no room in the hospitals.”

The newspaper mentions that the Polish workers were

bitter when they saw the sums former Social Democratic Party (SPD) leader Sigmar Gabriel had collected as a consultant for owner Clemens Tönnies. From March to May 2020, Gabriel received a flat fee of €10,000 per month and an additional four-figure fee for each day of travel. But the Polish, Romanian, Bulgarian and German workers who are risking their lives are waiting in vain for a bonus “for all that has happened to us,” as the worker said.

On television late Wednesday evening, a documentary by ZDF-Zoom highlighted the extent of the exploitation and oppression. The pandemic had cast a glaring spotlight, making the precarious working and living conditions visible to everyone.

In Gütersloh, 7,000 workers were sent into quarantine for four weeks. Their accommodation and entire housing estates were sealed off with construction fences and guarded by the police. “How did it come to this?” ask the filmmakers.

For one thing, there are his good relations with high society, which enabled master butcher Clemens Tönnies to rise to become a billionaire meat baron, but the programme did not show the whole network of connections. An important link is undoubtedly Liz Mohn, the heiress of the Bertelsmann media conglomerate in Gütersloh and confidante of Chancellor Angela Merkel, with whom Tönnies maintains social contacts, along with Siegfried Russwurm, the acting chairman of the supervisory board of Thyssenkrupp and designated president of the BDI (Federation of German Industries), who sits on Tönnies’s advisory board.

Sigmar Gabriel, the former federal economics minister and ex-SPD chairman, is also not mentioned. The programme does rightly point out that the rampant use of subcontracting was a result of the labour market “reforms” of the SPD-Green Schröder-Fischer government (1999–2005) and its “Agenda 2010.” On March 14, 2003, Gerhard Schröder, in his capacity as chancellor, announced that his government would “cut state benefits, demand personal responsibility and more personal contribution from each individual.”

However, the documentary did not provide an answer to the highly topical question, how it was that workers were being locked up behind barriers, guarded by police.

The pandemic is enabling a clearer view of the levels

of exploitation at Tönnies and the social conditions that underlie them. A thin layer of billionaires at the top of society has enriched itself immeasurably by transforming ever-larger sections of the working class into low-wage slaves, using the police to keep the workers in check.

However, all this can only be understood with reference to the role and complete integration of the supposed “workers’ representatives” in the German trade unions. For years, they have suppressed all resistance by the working class and prevented any alternative to the SPD, Greens and the Left Party from emerging. For decades, they have been cultivating “social partnership” and “industrial peace” with the employers, always under the nationalist motto: “Everything for Germany as an industrial location.”

The result is now evident. Hundreds of thousands of people are employed in temporary jobs, contract work, mini-jobs, fixed-term contracts, part-time work, and so on. According to official figures, 7.7 million, at least one-fifth of employees, are slaving away for a cheap wage.

The meat-processing plants are only the tip of the iceberg, and coronavirus outbreaks are not only to be found at Tönnies, but also at Westfleisch, Vion and Müller slaughterhouses, as well as in companies in other sectors. Meanwhile, the Tönnies company, which slaughters 25,000 pigs on peak days at its main plant in Rheda-Wiedenbrück, is in the process of expanding its other locations in Emsland, Schleswig-Holstein and Saxony-Anhalt.

The confidence of the capitalists that they can get away with anything is shown by the fact that Clemens Tönnies last week claimed recourse from the state of North Rhine-Westphalia for the four-week compulsory break. In other words, he expects to be financially compensated for the coronavirus outbreak his production caused.



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