

German chicken processing plant remains open despite coronavirus outbreak

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A chicken processing plant owned by the German brand Wiesenhof was reported as a coronavirus hotspot as of last Saturday. Mass testing at the facility in Lohne, Lower Saxony, resulted in 66 positive COVID-19 cases. The plant is operated by Oldenburger Poultry Specialists (OGS), which is part of Germany's largest poultry breeder and processor, the PHW Group.

Precariously employed workers have once again been most affected. Of the 66 positive cases, 48 workers are employed by subcontractors, five by staffing agencies, and one works for an external cleaning company. Only 12 are directly employed at the slaughterhouse. In addition to the infected workers, a further 70 were identified as close contacts and sent into quarantine.

Already in late June, 45 workers tested positive at a Wiesenhof plant belonging to the same company in Wildeshausen, Lower Saxony. At the time, the plant was closed for two weeks. This time around, local council leader Herbert Winkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) told a press conference on Sunday that there was no need to close the facility. He claimed that the infections largely took place due to private contacts, even though the rapid spread of the disease to 66 workers makes transmission within the plant all but certain.

In the slaughterhouse, “no particular infection hotspot” was identified, apart from the packaging area of the plant, where workers congregate during breaks. They probably “failed to observe social distancing,” said the council leader.

The claims by the local CDU official are in line with the racist tirades of North Rhine-Westphalia's Minister President Armin Laschet (CDU). The massive coronavirus outbreak at a Tönnies slaughterhouse had nothing to do with the easing of coronavirus restrictions because “Romanians and Bulgarians travelled and

that's where the virus came from,” Laschet stated a month ago. “That's what will happen everywhere.” The common message is: workers are responsible for all of the hotspots because they have dragged the virus into otherwise perfectly functioning businesses.

As with the outbreaks at Tönnies, Vion, Westfleisch and other slaughterhouses, the politicians' main concern is keeping production running so profits continue to pile up. By contrast, nothing is to be done to alter the systematic super-exploitation of the workers. However, it is precisely the brutal working conditions, characterised by low wages, stress, overwork and terrible living conditions, that encourage the spread of the virus. There remains no vaccine for the highly contagious virus, which is spread via aerosols. Workers in particular, who carry out strenuous labour side by side for hours on end, have no way to protect themselves.

The social dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic can no longer be denied. Apart from elderly care homes and hospitals, the main hotspots have been located in slaughterhouses, mail distribution centres and refugee accommodation centres, as well as schools and apartment blocks in working-class neighbourhoods and impoverished city districts. One of the latest outbreaks, detected in the district of Uelzen on Monday, reportedly impacted 13 people at a school, including families who “live in close proximity to each other,” as the official announcement put it.

It is the working class above all that is bearing the heaviest burden due to the pandemic. Workers bear the brunt of the job cuts, plant closures and wage cuts currently being agreed on by the corporate bosses and union heads. But workers also pay a much higher price than the privileged layers of society when it comes to living conditions and the impact on health and well-

being.

This is made particularly clear by the case numbers in the health care sector. Doctors and medical personnel account for 10 percent of all infections globally, a report last weekend noted. Although the pandemic is spreading comparatively slowly in Germany, the Robert Koch Institute noted in its statistics that 20 doctors and other medical professionals, seven teachers and five employees “in the meat packing industry or the kitchens of restaurants” have died. These figures are undoubtedly incomplete.

On Monday, the World Health Organisation reported a new daily record for infections, with 260,000 new cases. Total infections have now risen to over 15 million, with more than 600,000 deaths. While the worst figures come from the United States, Brazil and India, large parts of Europe have also been hit hard by the pandemic.

Figures for Europe are certainly comparable with those in the United States. In the European economic region, including Britain, 1.6 million people have been infected with the virus; over 180,000 have died. The death tolls in the five largest economies (Britain 45,400, Italy 35,000, France 30,000, Spain 28,500, and Germany 9,000) amount to 148,000, more than the official death toll in the United States. Deaths from the coronavirus totalled nearly 144,000 on Thursday, according to Johns Hopkins University.

The German federal government and leading state politicians have no intention of effectively protecting workers from the disease. Following the maxim “profits before health and life,” the main priority is to get the economy up and running at full speed. This was made clear on Sunday by Helge Braun (CDU), the head of Angela Merkel’s Chancellor’s Office.

In an interview with the *Bild am Sonntag* newspaper, Braun declared that currently it can be said that “In Germany, we have the coronavirus under control.” The government will not only ensure that “schools run largely as normal after the summer holidays,” but “the football stadiums no longer need to be empty, I think.”

The head of the Chancellor’s Office added the obligatory rhetoric about maintaining the wearing of masks and other hygiene measures, such as handwashing. But the *Bild* largely ignored this, with its headline, “Encouraging discussion with Chancellor’s Office head Helge Braun: Fans should return to

stadiums after the summer, children can go to school as normal!”

The government has apparently decided to adopt the policy for schools imposed by the state government in Saxony for the entire country. A study was presented last week in Saxony to justify the unrestricted reopening of schools and childcare facilities. According to its conclusions, children are “more of a brake” on the pandemic.

This dangerous assessment stands in stark contrast to a series of serious studies recently conducted. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported on a study in South Korea that examined close to 60,000 people in contact with someone infected with coronavirus. It found that few children under the age of 10 passed on the infection to others. However, children under the age of 19 infected contacts above the average rate, including for adults.

There have also been large coronavirus outbreaks in Israeli schools. A second coronavirus wave is threatening Israel, with the premature opening of schools being blamed by many for this development.

The claim that children are “actually a brake” on the pandemic and are not at risk from the disease is contradicted by a case reported on the *World Socialist Web Site* from Texas. Eighty-five babies aged 1 or younger were infected in Nueces County.

The infection rate in the county has risen dramatically in July after it had previously declined. A health care director warned the public on Saturday about the infections among babies. One of the babies died on July 6; it was less than six months old.



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