Government agency minutes reveal at least 40 active COVID-19 outbreaks at UK food processing plants

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The endangering of workers' safety and lives by corporations in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic was further exposed on Thursday as it was revealed that there are at least 40 active outbreaks in food processing plants in England alone.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) disclosed that this was the situation as of Tuesday this week, with outbreaks in plants manufacturing both meat and non-meat products. The FSA is the government department responsible for protecting public health in relation to food in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The information is not available in the news section of the FSA's website but is buried among the minutes and reports of its August 26 board meeting. Nor is it available on the FSA's social media accounts. The figures were first made public Wednesday in an article on the foodmanufacture.co.uk website.

Foodmanufacture reported, "The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has revealed that it is monitoring 40 outbreaks of coronavirus at food plants in England.

"Speaking at the FSA board meeting on 26 August, its chief operating officer Dr Colin Sullivan said that this was a 'small number' of sites considering the size of the sector.

"'For example in England yesterday we were looking at approximately 40 food processing plans in both meat and non-meat with active outbreaks,' he said.

"He did admit that there was some evidence that food processing plants were 'more likely' to be impacted by outbreaks. But said he said he had 'no figures to hand.'"

Given the resurgence of the virus in recent weeks, as Boris Johnson's Conservative government continues its reopening of the economy, the real figure of plants impacted is likely to be much higher.

On Thursday, the *Daily Mail* reported that Sullivan, "admitted the figure is not comprehensive, and may be higher, but said: '*The number that I mentioned, was one we are content to make public*. It is a small number of a big total.'"

It reported more comments from Sullivan aimed at playing down any threat. "To put the figures in context, across England, Wales and Northern Ireland there are more than 20,000 food processing plants. Only a very small number have been impacted.

"We are always going to have a number of these as long as Covid is present, given the many factors that are present in food processing plants; the conditions, the aerosol issues, the way people work close by each other, the fact that staff in plants sometimes live together, sometimes travel together. All those issues need to be managed."

The *Mail* piece included a further statement, this time from FSA's chief executive, Emily Miles. The pro-Tory newspaper said she "stressed there is no need for alarm, saying: 'The risk of transmission of Covid-19 through the consumption or handling of food, or food packaging, remains very low.'"

Workers should reject with contempt the portrayal of outbreaks of a deadly disease in at least 40 food processing workplaces as no big deal, and the implication that workers cannot remain safe from infection in food processing plants because of the horrendous conditions that exist in them as standard.

The argument that the problem is minor because there are outbreaks at 40 plants out of a total of 20,000 is spurious. In the UK, there are 7,000 supermarkets that deal with tonnes of fresh and processed food on a daily basis and not a single one has been forced to close. This is because they are required to prove to the public each day that they are safe and so have to have social distancing measures in place, hand sanitiser available and staff and customers legally required to wear masks.

No such safety demands are placed on food processing plants, which are essentially being allowed to self-regulate.

Everything is being done to downplay the enormous spread of COVID-19 since the government moved to end the lockdown on July 4.

As a result of the lockdown, by mid-July, cases had fallen to an average of 540 a day, but this has since more than doubled to an average of 1,138 new cases daily. Over six weeks until this month, there were fewer than 1,000 new cases each day. Yet just in August alone, over 1,000 new cases have been reported on 15 days. On Thursday 1,522 new infections were recorded—the highest level for 11 weeks—along with 12 deaths. Yesterday, 1,276 cases were announced and nine deaths.

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As a result of the entirely predictable resurgence of cases, the government was forced to put a vast section of the north of England under “local lockdowns.” Cases are rising so quickly in the UK’s second largest city, Birmingham, that it is now classed as requiring “enhanced support,” in order to avoid the same measures.

At the same time, in order to ensure the flow of profits to the corporations, the government and its agencies, including the FSA, are doing everything they can to restrict information about the spread of the virus. Nothing will be revealed about which food plants are affected or how many workers are infected, despite the major danger to public safety posed.

In response to questions from the Nottinghamshire Live media group, who asked the government if two local factories, Bakkavor Desserts in Newark and Riverside Bakery, were part of the 40—following recent outbreaks at these factories—the government went into radio silence.

“We will not be providing a running commentary on, or sharing details of, individual businesses affected. It is likely such a list would be incomplete and to publish names could impact on commercial activity,” said a government spokesperson.

The most graphic illustration of how the major food processing corporations are given free rein to do as they please can be seen in the events at the Greencore sandwich plant in Northampton. Last Friday, the plant, with over 2,000 workers, was forced to close after a COVID outbreak infected nearly 300 employees. The surge in cases in Northampton centred on the Moulton district where the plant is located. The firm reported that it would close for 14 days for a deep clean.

Despite Greencore’s claim to have closed the factory, it was revealed just four days later that dispatch and maintenance workers were still working at the site. George Attwall, a regional officer for the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers’ Union, which represents workers at the factory, commented “People have been saying what about us? We are still working? They have previously been travelling in with production workers in the same cars, they have been sharing smoking areas, canteens. Some families even work together—husband in dispatch, wife in production.”

Greencore kept its facilities open with government permission. Lucy Wightman, Director of Public Health Northamptonshire, said the Department for Health and Social Care were in “agreement” that some parts of the operation could continue as long as long as staff had not returned a positive test for the virus. This is being allowed under conditions in which cases have continued to mount. Yesterday, it was revealed that a second round of testing took the total number of workers infected in Greencore’s outbreak to 324.

In a statement issued Tuesday, a Greencore spokesperson confirmed its operations were back up and running. “A small number of colleagues who have completed their self-isolation periods are now beginning to return to the site, and production is therefore gradually restarting on a limited basis.” They added, “This process is of course being carried out in close consultation with the Department of Health & Social Care, Public Health England and other government bodies.”

Plants are being kept open until dozens of workers start to be struck down with COVID infections. This week, one of the largest chicken processing factories in the country, Banham Poultry in Norfolk, was forced to close after 75 workers tested positive for coronavirus. As a result, 350 families are now in self-isolation. Last Friday, a worker at the plant fell ill and by Monday this week seven out of 15 workers tested were also infected.

In their lust for profits, the food conglomerates can only proceed to recklessly endanger workers lives in their plants and in the wider communities around them due to the perfidious role of the trade unions. As is the case with the bakers’ union and every other, these organisations will not lift a finger to mobilise their members to strike and shut down plants that are operating unsafe environments. Even more criminally, despite the unions having tens of thousands of “health and safety” representatives in workplaces nationally, they are colluding with the companies, local authorities—mainly Labour Party-run—and government agencies in concealing the scale of outbreaks and workers infected.

These developments underscore the urgency of the Socialist Equality Party’s call for the formation of rank-and-file safety committees to be established in all workplaces, independent of the trade unions. These committees will represent and fight for the safety of workers, in opposition to the demands of management and the profit principle. They will draw up detailed regulations and standards that must be monitored and enforced. Where conditions are violated, there must be a stoppage of work.

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