

Report exposes huge scale of COVID-19 infections in UK food processing industry

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2 October 2020

COVID-19 infections are rocketing in the UK. In the last week, there have been 38,123 cases and 243 deaths.

On Friday, it was announced that eight people had died due to COVID-19, with six others in intensive care at one hospital in Wales after a coronavirus outbreak. The Royal Glamorgan Hospital in Llantrisant had to impose “significant temporary service restrictions” after confirming 82 cases of COVID-19. The same day the populations of the Liverpool city region, Warrington, Hartlepool, and Middlesbrough were instructed not to socially mix with those from other households—the latest in local lockdowns affecting over 13 million people.

That the local lockdowns—which only target personal behaviour—have done nothing to prevent the spread of the virus is proven by research published by the *Guardian* yesterday. It found that “In 11 out of 16 English cities and towns where restrictions were imposed nine weeks ago, the infection rate has at least doubled, with cases in five areas of Greater Manchester rising faster than the England average in that time.”

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the government and its agencies have done everything to play down the scale of the spread of the virus—particularly in workplaces—to keep the profits rolling in. The massive scale of under reporting of cases of COVID-19 in the meat processing industry is highlighted in a report by the Pensions & Investment Research Consultants Ltd (PIRC). PIRC describes itself as “Europe’s largest independent corporate governance and shareholder advisory consultancy” whose “remit is to offer advice to ethical investors.”

It found that cases of COVID-19 in the industry are at least 30 times higher than officially reported. PIRC reported that it “has uncovered labour rights and safety breaches with COVID-19 outbreaks and fatalities occurring across the sector.”

The report gives figures on those working in food processing and their working conditions. With 430,000 employees, around 1.4 percent of the UK workforce, it is the largest manufacturing subsector. Over two thirds of food

processing companies use temporary or agency staff. A quarter of those employed in the industry are EU migrants. Average pay is lower than in manufacturing overall and nearly 7,000 workers were paid less than the national minimum wage in 2018.

There are several big employers in the sector, including Boparan Holdings which owns the 2 Sisters Food Group with 18,000 employees and Cranswick employing 7,000.

PIRC’s findings on infections in the industry were based on speaking to food processing workers, trade union representatives and companies since the beginning of the pandemic in March. It found, “From a sample of 20 media reports we know that there have been at least 1461 COVID-19 cases in food manufacturing, and 6 fatalities. We believe the actual figure to be much higher.

“This is in stark contrast with the data released by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), showing that only 47 COVID-19 cases had been reported in the sector up to 8 August. No fatalities had been reported.”

The report explained the gap between the two sets of data results from the HSE’s “RIDDOR” (Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations) guidance used by companies to report COVID-19 incidents. This only tells companies to “make a judgement, based on the information available, as to whether or not a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19 is likely to have been caused by an occupational exposure.”

It is left to the *company* to determine whether a case of COVID-19 arose with the workplace or is a result of an infection in the community. Only cases determined to have arisen in the workplace have to be reported to the HSE.

Testimonials from workers who spoke to PIRC revealed some of the terrible conditions they faced. Among comments were:

“They’ve already made redundancies in one factory, then they used agency workers to top up – which isn’t allowed. They’ve been using 100 agency workers a day during the pandemic.”

“We weren’t separated initially, people were actually

touching each other. The night shift walked out over it.”

“There are only 4 or 5 sanitizer pumps around site for around 300 staff... I’ve been told by my HR manager if we don't feel safe we can take 3 months off with no pay.”

“No chance of social distancing, corridors are too small and work areas are not designed for this sort of thing.”

Conditions outside the workplace facilitate the spread of COVID-19. Workers often use company provided bus transport to get to work, and with a quarter of the workforce being European Union migrants shared accommodation for employees is common.

In August, the Food Standard Agency (FSA) disclosed it was dealing with COVID-19 outbreaks at 40 food processing plants across the country. Indicating there were many more among 20,000 food processing plants, the FSA said the 40 were ones which “we are content to make public.”

Outbreaks of COVID-19 infections in their hundreds in food processing plants continue to take place, making a nonsense of claims there were only 47 cases of COVID-19 related to food and drink production.

In early September, several cases of COVID-19 were reported among staff at the Aunt Bessie’s Yorkshire pudding factory in Hull. Aunt Bessie’s is part of Nomad Foods, the parent company of Birds Eye. Around 400 work at the plant. The company announced a “small number” of its staff had tested positive for the virus. It ordered a deep clean, after which production continued.

Later in the month it was announced one of the victims, a woman who had worked for the company for over 20 years, had died in hospital. Another was seriously ill in hospital.

Also in September several members of staff at the Greggs bakery plant in Longbenton, near Newcastle, tested positive for COVID-19. The plant which employs around 300 staff halted production for a deep clean. This is just a few weeks after Greggs was forced to temporarily shut its distribution centre, in Bramley, near Leeds, after 20 workers out of 150 tested positive.

On Monday, cases were confirmed at a Bernard Matthew turkey processing plant near Halesworth in Suffolk. Public health officials tested around 100 staff and 25 tested positive with a further 54 self-isolating. Production at the plant which employs around 1,000 continued.

Yesterday, the Pilgrim's Pride pork meat processing plant in Pool, Cornwall, reported a mass outbreak. Out of 500 staff tested, more than 170 tested positive.

The lives of workers are being endangered with the government, companies, trade unions, and local authorities working together to conceal essential information about the spread of a deadly disease. Responding to the PIRC report, Unite the Union national official Bev Clarkson accused food

processing companies of failing to protect workers. “The cold temperatures, metal surfaces and close working conditions found in many food manufacturing sites make them easy environments for the virus to spread in,” she said.

“In too many workplaces these risk factors have been exacerbated by employers neglecting to implement proper coronavirus health and safety measures, as well as refusing to provide adequate sick pay to those who need to self-isolate.”

Clarkson omits to mention that the employers could not have imposed such practises without its collusion. On March 20, Unite issued a statement “on cooperative working with the food and drinks industry,” declaring, “Unite, which has thousands of members working in food and drinks industry, has been working closely and constructively with employers during the current coronavirus emergency.”

A joint statement was issued May 6 by Unite, Usdaw, BFAWU and the GMB trade unions and the Food and Drink Federation (FDF). FDF chief executive, Ian Wright, said, “Partnership between employers and unions has been crucial to continuing production over the last eight weeks.” Wright concluded, “We look forward to working closely with our trade union colleagues to do so.”

Food processing workers must form rank and file committees to fight for the resources and conditions to make their workplaces as safe as possible. Every factory where there is an infection must be closed for a deep clean until it is deemed safe, with those workers forced to self-isolate afforded full pay. The fight for workplace safety must be linked with a broader restructuring of the economy to end the stranglehold exerted by the corporate and financial elite over every aspect of life.



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