

Illinois governor admits factories and other workplaces are center of COVID-19 outbreaks

Kristina Betinis
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Illinois Democratic Governor JB Pritzker announced Friday that 52 industrial facilities have been the leading source of COVID-19 outbreaks since July 1. The state reopened non-essential businesses at the end of May. The announcement comes several days after news media leaked a list of locations linked to COVID-19 infections, which state officials had concealed from the public.

The list of infected workplaces includes those owned by Amazon, Ford, Fiat Chrysler, Tyson Foods, UPS and other giant corporations. The revelation is a damning exposure of the corporate executives, politicians from both parties, union officials and media spokesmen who have claimed that the largely cosmetic safety protocols implemented in factories and warehouses across the country have protected workers from the deadly contagion.

The number of COVID-19 cases in Illinois has climbed to more than 10,000 per day as the disease tears through the population of United States and Europe. The positivity rate has climbed from a low of 3 percent in September to a high of 12 percent in early November. State officials reported Sunday that 4,300 people are currently hospitalized, of which 833 are in intensive care and 368 on ventilators.

On October 27, Illinois Department of Public Health raised the number of infections that constitutes an “outbreak” in non-healthcare and school settings from two or more cases to five.

The state, led by the billionaire Democratic governor and Democratic supermajority in the state legislature, has been deliberately concealing details of COVID-19 outbreaks in order to prevent actions by workers to shutdown non-essential production and protect their lives.

On October 29, a local NBC and Telemundo affiliate reported the existence of workplace outbreak data the state was maintaining but not releasing to the public. Investigative reporter Sky Chadde indicated the detailed Illinois workplace outbreak data were accidentally shared with him as part of an open-records request. NBC5 and Telemundo subsequently reported their representatives had asked Illinois Department of Public Health officials “about the list and why it remains secret” for weeks. As of this reporting, no answer to that

question has been offered.

In reading the leaked data, one gets the sense of reading the findings of a massive experiment on human test subjects. This data is housed at the “Documenting COVID-19 project at Columbia University's Brown Institute for Media Innovation.” The workplaces the state had identified as centers of COVID-19 outbreak resulting in infections in Illinois go through the month of September and include:

- Amazon
- Birdseye Foods
- Blue Cross Blue Shield
- Chicago Transit Authority
- DHL
- Enterprise Car Rental
- Frito Lay
- Ford Motor Co. Chicago
- FCA Belvidere
- Great Lakes US Naval Base
- JBS
- Jel Sert
- MSI Express
- Procter & Gamble
- Rockford Mass Transit
- Smithfield
- Tyson
- United Parcel Service

In addition to these facilities contributing to “community spread” in Illinois, they are also spreading the disease across state borders. Many workers at Illinois industrial sites commute from neighboring states of Missouri, Indiana, Wisconsin and Iowa. The Quad Cities area, home to manufacturing and meatpacking, straddles Iowa and Illinois and is not far from neighboring states Missouri and Wisconsin. Ford’s Chicago Assembly Plant is a short distance from the Indiana border.

In addition to industrial facilities, Pritzker noted other leading sources of outbreaks were, in order of spread, unspecified “community events,” churches, colleges, and jails and prisons. The data was compiled based on the work of about 3,300 contact tracers across the state, including volunteers. It is likely,

however, that this is an underestimation of the actual number of infections, since contact tracers cannot always reach people who have been infected and large numbers of people are unable to get tested for the disease.

The new data on workplace infections in Illinois is a warning to workers across the US and internationally. It underscores the critical need for workers to build rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, to break the conspiracy of silence about the spread of the disease, enforce health and safety, and organize collective action to shut down unsafe workplaces and protect the lives of workers and their families.

In mid-March, autoworkers, first in Europe, then in North America, carried out a wave of wildcat strikes that forced the shutdown of industries and partial lockdowns across the US, which saved tens of thousands of lives.

But after the passage of the bipartisan CARES Act, which provided a multi-trillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street and corporate America, the Trump administration and state and local officials from both parties began a campaign to herd workers back into the factories to resume the production of corporate profit. The key to reopening the plants were the claims by Democratic governors like New York's Andrew Cuomo, Michigan's Gretchen Whitmer and Pritzker in Illinois that non-essential production could be restarted safely. These were echoed by the United Auto Workers, the United Food and Commercial Workers and other unions.

The latest wave of illness has demonstrated that the current political and economic set-up poses immense and growing social dangers. While Democratic leaders may issue mask mandates, it is the bipartisan "back-to-work" campaign aimed at restoring profitability of businesses that is driving the latest lethal wave of disease. These experiences pose the sharpest warning to workers and young people about an incoming Biden administration, which is just as determined to defend corporate profits as Trump and the Republicans.

As the virus spreads out of control, US automakers are working to exploit the pandemic to improve their financial and market positions relative to domestic and foreign competitors. Last month, Ford global manufacturing chief Gary Johnson boasted, "We have people testing positive, but it's not affecting operations."

GM CEO Mary Barra, whose company announced \$4 billion in third quarter profits last week, made it clear there would be no new shutdowns even as cases spread. As the *Detroit Free Press* noted, "[D]on't look for GM to shut down its North American plants again even as the nation sees a resurgence of COVID-19. Barra told reporters the automaker believes the work safety protocols it has in place are protecting employees from getting sick."

The UAW has been instrumental in helping management conceal the outbreak of infections and blame workers for any infections in the plants. "People leave work and then they have their own protocols outside of the workplace," said Gerald

Kariem, UAW vice president and director of the union's Ford department told Reuters earlier this year. "But in terms of the workplace, the protocols are probably better than the protocols that you'll see out in the general public."

At the same time, the UAW has given the company a green light to hire low-paid temps to replace workers who are staying home due to safety concerns or to care for children who are learning remotely from home.

The ruthless pursuit of profits at the expense of life and health is what is also behind the rush to send school children back to in-person learning so that parents can work longer hours consistently. This campaign is being aided by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), National Education Association (NEA) and their state and local affiliates. Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) officials have claimed in recent weeks that what is needed is simply a sensible plan to return to in-person learning, even as the disease rates spiral out of control. This is under conditions in which the reopening of schools and colleges in the US and Europe has been a major contributor to the public health catastrophe.

The WSWS has been consistent in warning workers of the danger posed by the covering up of outbreaks in workplaces and the wider community, including schools. The current wave of disease demonstrates the need for decisive leadership from workers themselves, taking the form of building independent rank-and-file safety committees.

A lead has been given by groups of autoworkers and teachers in the US and around the world who have formed rank-and-file committees and are prepared to lead the fight. Autoworkers, teachers, health care workers, grocery workers, UPS and Amazon workers and others must unite in a common fight to shut down non-essential production and redirect society's resources to protect the incomes and livelihoods of all of those affected by the public health and economic crises.

The WSWS has also explained that the major obstacle to a humane and effective response to the pandemic is the capitalist system, which subordinates every aspect of life—including life itself—to the ever-greater accumulation of personal wealth by the corporate and financial oligarchy. That is why the fight for the day-to-day protection of health and safety in the factories and other workplaces must be combined with the political mobilization of the working class to take power in its own hands and carry out the socialist reorganization of economic life based on the principle of production for human need, not private profit.



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