

As virus surges in North Dakota, Fargo food distribution workers strike over lack of COVID-19 protections

Shannon Jones
24 November 2020

Seventy-five workers at food distributor Cash-Wa in Fargo, North Dakota are continuing a strike over health and safety issues as COVID-19 rampages through the state, which recently reported the highest death rate for any state or country in the world.

The workers warn that inadequate safety protections risk turning the Fargo warehouse, operated by Cash-Wa, into a major vector for disease transmission. The workers, members of Teamsters Local 120, walked out November 18. They had been working without a contract since August. Local 120 claims management has been knowingly violating CDC guidelines.

Workers walked out after over 10 percent of the Fargo workforce tested positive for COVID-19. Strikers are calling for adequate screening measures, proper training of workers in cleaning, and adequate safety protections, including dividers in break areas. The drivers and warehouse workers deliver food to area schools and restaurants. The walkout could affect facilities in South Dakota, Minnesota and North Dakota, including Sioux Falls schools as well as Dairy Queen, Subway, Taco John's and Pizza Ranch locations in the three states.

Cash-Wa Food Services of Americ is a multi-state company based in Kearney, Nebraska. It bills itself as the eighteenth-largest Broadline Foodservice Distribution company in the US, with facilities in Fargo, Kearney and Aberdeen, South Dakota. Fargo is the only unionized location.

The strike had been initially set for November 19, but workers began setting up pickets the day before. Cash-Wa has been attempting to continue operations using management personnel.

According to a statement by Local 120 spokesman

Brian Nowak, "We want them to advise our employees, give them proper instruction on how to handle this COVID virus. We don't want this stuff going into restaurants and other facilities. We know that North Dakota is a hot spot right now, and it's only going to get worse."

While North Dakota, along with other relatively rural areas, escaped the brunt of the initial wave of COVID-19 infections and deaths, that has now completely reversed. According to an analysis by the American Federation of Scientists, North Dakota has recently experienced the highest COVID-19 daily mortality rate in the world of any state or country. North Dakota is recording 18.2 daily deaths per 1 million people while neighboring South Dakota has 17.4 deaths per million, the third-highest rate in the world.

As of Thursday, North Dakota, population of just 762,000, had recorded 883 total deaths. A statewide record 37 people died on Thursday, a rate of 48.5 per million, with over 1,000 new infections.

While imposing some limited COVID-19 restrictions, including the wearing of masks in indoor business and public settings, North Dakota Republican Governor Doug Burgum has stressed "individual responsibility" to contain the virus. Schools are being allowed to remain open. High school winter sports are being suspended, but only until December 14.

Against this background of criminal incompetence and indifference, workers are facing a fight for their lives in hospitals, schools, manufacturing plants and distribution centers. A strike support Facebook page set up by Local 120 had 266 "likes" by workers expressing their support for the Cash-Wa workers. One worker

wrote, “Finally someone is taking a stand. The covid safety measures at my workplace are a joke.” Other postings read, “stay strong” and “Be safe brothers and take care of business!!”

Of the more than 1,000 new COVID-19 cases in North Dakota, 341 were in Cass County where Fargo is located. Cass County has recorded 118 total deaths since the start of the pandemic. Recent deaths come from all over the state, including nine from Ward County, five from Foster County, five from Barnes County and three each from Richland and Dickey counties. The youngest to die was in her 40s, while the oldest were over 90.

According to the *Grand Forks Herald*, almost 60 percent of the COVID-19 deaths in North Dakota have come from residents of nursing homes or other long-term care facilities. At least 555 nursing home residents and 570 workers are currently known to be infected. Ward, Foster and Barnes counties are the most severely affected, and reported more than half of Tuesday's record-high death count.

With large numbers of people expected to travel and intermix over Thanksgiving, cases are likely to surge, threatening the state's already overwhelmed health care system. In addition to the highest death rate, the state leads the US in known positive cases per million.

North Dakota and neighboring South Dakota are also home to giant meatpacking plants that have been a major vector in the spread of COVID-19, including the Smithfield pork plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where 1,300 workers were infected and at least four died. A new study by researchers at Columbia University and the University of Chicago found that as many as one in 12 cases of COVID-19 in the early stage of the pandemic can be tied to outbreaks at meatpacking plants, which led to a subsequent spread of the disease in surrounding communities.

The walkout by workers at Cash-Wa articulates the growing anger of workers over the abandonment by all levels of the corporate and political establishment of any measures to contain the virus and their de facto embrace of the homicidal policy of “herd immunity.” This includes so-called essential workers in food processing and food distribution who are being forced to stay on the job without any serious health safeguards.

Earlier this month, drivers at United Natural Foods voted to strike over health and safety issues, in

particular management's failure to comply with New York and New Jersey COVID-19 safety guidelines. Workers say the company has not provided masks and hand sanitizer and has not disinfected the trucks in months.

Teamsters Local 120 covers 11,500 workers in Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota and South Dakota. However, the Teamsters, the UFCW and the rest of the unions have done nothing to break the isolation of the strike and defend the embattled Cash-Wa strikers.

The stand taken by the Cash-Wa workers will resonate among autoworkers, teachers, logistics workers, health care workers, and food service workers around the US and globally. We urge Cash-Wa workers and all workers seeking to fight in defense of basic health and safety standards to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and learn more about establishing rank and file committees at your workplace. The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party demand the closure of nonessential production until the pandemic is contained and full financial support for workers and small businesses. Essential workers must be guaranteed safe conditions including daily universal testing and the right to halt operations if conditions are unsafe without retaliation.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact