

Third worker dies of COVID-19 at a Bakkavor food plant in the UK

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Two workers have died and dozens of workers have tested positive for COVID-19 at the Bakkavor Salads plant in Tilmanstone near Dover, Kent.

Food manufacturer Bakkavor is a UK-based conglomerate employing 17,000 workers in 23 factories. It supplies fresh prepared meals, salads, desserts, pizza and bread to British supermarkets including Tesco, Sainsburys, Marks & Spencer and Waitrose. The company also operates in the United States, where it had five plants in 2019, and China, where it had nine. In 2018, it reported revenues of £1.86 billion and pre-tax profits of £67 million, up 36 percent over the previous year.

On December 1, it was reported that a worker at the Tilmanstone plant had died after contracting the virus. The plant employs 800 workers, and the death was reported under conditions in which COVID-19 infections were soaring among the workforce. The GMB trade union reported that cases among the workforce at the time “rocketed from 35 in the first week of November to 79 by end of the month. At least 97 staff have been instructed to self-isolate.”

Just two days later, on December 3, a second worker at the plant was reported dead from COVID-19. By this time, 99 workers had been affected, according to the GMB.

No details were made public about the workers who died at the Tilmanstone plant.

Those deaths brought the total number of fatalities among Bakkavor’s workforce to three, following the death of an employee at a bakery run by Bakkavor in Devizes, Wiltshire in southern England. On August 12, the *Wiltshire Gazette and Herald* reported that the worker was a “68-year-old Devizes man, who had worked at the bakery for many years. He died in the Great Western Hospital in Swindon in April.”

The newspaper reported, “His family believe he contracted the virus at work after he was sneezed over by another employee who later also became ill.”

As to why the death only became public knowledge in August, the newspaper explained, “The company said it was unaware of the sneezing allegation and that it had not

reported the death as at the time this was the responsibility of the hospital. Wiltshire Council's public health department was not aware of the death until told by the *Gazette* this week.”

Infections were increasing at the plant as the death came to light, with the *Gazette* reporting, “Last week five coronavirus cases were reported at Bakkavor on the Hopton Industrial Estate... By Friday [August 8] this had risen to seven and now the figure is 13”.

In August, an outbreak was reported at another Bakkavor plant, a dessert making facility in Newark, Nottinghamshire. An initial 20 staff were found to be infected. By August 18, after testing 1,262 of the 1,600-strong workforce, 98 were confirmed infected and 59 of these were reported to be already back in work.

The BBC quoted Richard Wiles, who works next to the Bakkavor plant. He said, “The workers have been upset for quite a while that they don’t think enough has been done to protect them... It seems there has been a slow, modern British response to this and cakes have come before Covid safety.”

In the case of all three deaths, the company and local Public Health England authorities have insisted that safety is paramount in their plants and that there is no evidence to prove that infections originated on their premises. None of the bromides from Bakkavor about how safe their operations are can be taken at face value.

While it is obvious that infections originated outside workplaces, with many plants sited in areas in which the virus is surging, if workplaces are unsafe—as has been proven time and again to be the case in the UK and internationally, particularly in the meat packing and food processing industry—then the virus then spreads like wildfire within them.

Workers are caught between a rock and a hard place, knowing that if they do not attend work they risk losing their pay. In May, it was reported that two workers were infected at a Bakkavor plant in Spalding in Lincolnshire. A family member of an employee at the plant told *Lincolnshire Live*, “The employees are scared. If they were to take time off to

protect themselves, they would not receive any pay unless they are confirmed ill. So many of the employees are forcing themselves into work so they can still afford to live... A lot of these people have families who are older and are at risk. We are needing help to sort something out for the workforce of Bakkavor."

Bakkavor has three plants in north London, employing around 4,000 workers. Many are immigrants from Sri Lanka and Gujarat and Goa in India.

In April, ITV obtained footage shot in a staff meeting at one of the plants, Bakkavor Meals, in Elveden, north London. Sean Madden, Bakkavor's head of operations at Elveden, was secretly filmed as he addressed staff. Workers were told that it is impossible to socially distance and many employees seen in the footage were not socially distant from one another.

Madden speaks to the workers only a few feet away from another man standing next to him. Holding a facemask, he states, "When you come into the factory because we can't socially distance in here, we want you to cover over your mouth and nose like this" [as he puts his face mask on].

Stating that workers need to be in the plant and on the production lines, he continues, "You know if we look at 45 percent of people who are off sick, maybe 5 percent of those have coronavirus. The other 40 percent of people, they just don't want to come."

He then threatens, "If we need to get rid of 200 people's jobs next month, I'm going to look at who turned up to work and I'm going to look at who didn't bother turning up to work. The people who didn't bother turning up to work, you know, they will be the first people that we have to get rid of unfortunately."

With the plant employing many workers from the Indian sub-continent, Madden's threat was repeated in Hindi.

Some executives at companies including Bakkavor, Foxtons, Persimmon, Severn Trent and Burberry took pay cuts earlier in the year as token gestures. This was under conditions in which hundreds of thousands of workers were being laid off as the pandemic worsened. The *Financial Times* noted, "Bakkavor were among the groups that cut payouts to investors as a result of coronavirus." Some of the top-paid directors at the firms "took a symbolic cut of 20 per cent—the amount that furloughed staff lose under the government scheme up to a cap of £2,500." However, things soon got back to normal, with the FT reporting in June, "Bakkavor is ... expected to revert to full pay from July."

While Bakkavor refused to close its operations despite outbreaks of a deadly virus at multiple plants, and three deaths, it moved quickly to protect its profits in August by announcing the closure of one of its plants in Spalding—affecting 500 workers. It was shut with no

opposition from the trade unions, with the firm announcing, "We've been working closely with our colleagues ... and Unite throughout the consultation process and can confirm that no viable solutions were put forward to our ongoing challenges."

Bakkavor's plants only remain open because of the pernicious role of the GMB. The union claimed it had "lodged a formal collective grievance" on behalf of its members at Tilmanstone after the death of the first worker, stating that "we believe the health and safety of our members has been seriously compromised at the factory." It added that "25% of the workforce [at Tilmanstone] has been affected by this outbreak—unfortunately Public Health England does not feel that this is enough to step in."

Nothing was done, with the union, even after the death of the second worker, saying only that it "requested the factory close to allow mass testing of employees and a deep clean of its factory. Once this has been done, the factory can reopen, with staff returning to work safe in the knowledge every step has been taken to ensure they are working in the safest possible environment."

On December 4, the day after the announcement of the death of the second worker, the GMB said it "has claimed a massive victory as the fresh food giant agreed full pay for staff off work and a rollout of mass testing at the Tilmanstone salads factory."

Only a rotten pro-company outfit could describe any of this as a "victory". The testing of an initial 375 staff confirmed that the plant was rife with infections as 48 employees tested positive, and another 44 went into self-isolation.

No more workers' lives should be lost so that companies can continue to turn a profit. Bakkavor's plants must be shut down until they can be made safe and workers fully compensated for lost wages. Workers at Bakkavor must take matters into their own hands and form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the trade unions. The Socialist Equality Party urges Bakkavor workers to contact us to begin this fightback.



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