

Greater numbers dying as COVID-19 infections spread in UK workplaces

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On Thursday, the death of a worker employed at the Muller Milk & Ingredients dairy in North Petherton, Somerset, was reported. The worker died after contracting COVID-19, amid a huge outbreak that has seen 47 staff members test positive. In total 95 of the 300 strong workforce are now self-isolating.

As with many corporations, the firm has not closed its plant but only reduced production as it tests the workforce. Müller sources milk from 1,600 farmers in Britain and manufactures a wide range of branded and private label dairy products.

Last week, Teresa Gorman, aged 56, a manager at a Tesco Extra supermarket in Trafford, Greater Manchester died. She had worked at Tesco for 14 years. The UK's largest supermarket chain was forced to close the branch after the death, which occurred during an outbreak of COVID-19 infecting up to 50 staff. Trafford saw a 35 percent surge in Covid cases in the week ending January 8. Tesco has not yet confirmed the cause of death.

Earlier this month, two employees who worked at a Tesco store in Greenock, Scotland, where there had also been a Covid outbreak, died. Outbreaks have occurred at Tesco stores in Glasgow, Kilmarnock, Elgin, and Port Glasgow.

The Just Food website reports on COVID-19 infections in the food industry. A January 8 entry noted 30 cases of the disease at the 2 Sisters poultry processing plant in South Lanarkshire, Scotland. The plant was temporarily closed in August last year after employees tested positive for the virus.

Data published by Public Health England covering January 4-10 showed a near 70 percent increase in reports of COVID-19 infections related to workplaces, with 175 workplace clusters. These workplaces were other than schools, hospitals or care homes.

Some employers are exploiting the loose wording of the government's guidance issued for the latest January 5 lockdown, which states, "Where people cannot work from home they should continue to travel to their workplace."

The list "includes but is not limited to, people who work in: critical national infrastructure, construction, manufacturing, childcare or education, essential public services."

In November, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) reported its latest figures on notifications of COVID-19 covering the period April 10 to November 14. It recorded a total of 14,428 occupation notifications of COVID-19, including 189 deaths. These were notifications reported to the HSE and local authorities.

The HSE figures showed a pronounced build-up from September in workplace infections as the impact of the ending of the first national lockdown began to show and schools and universities were reopened.

The report notes "the number of occupational COVID-19 notifications made to enforcing authorities has been **generally increasing week-on-week since early September**, (emphasis in original) with numbers in the latest week only slightly below the peak seen in April (1,183 weekly reports at the peak compared with 1,026 reports made in week commencing 8 November)."

The HSE receives notifications via the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR) system. It states, "Where a worker has been diagnosed as having COVID-19 and there is reasonable evidence to suggest that it was caused by occupational exposure, employers are required to report the case to the relevant enforcing authority under RIDDOR."

Employers abuse the system by claiming that there is

no proof that an infection originated in their workplace. The HSE notes “the RIDDOR notification system suffers from widespread under-reporting which has the potential to give a distorted view of both the scale and spread of cases by important risk factors such as industry sector.”

Some employers have ordered workers who have the National Health Service track and trace app on their phones to disable it while at work. This includes Rix Petroleum, a Hull-based fuel delivery firm. The company’s managing director told the *BBC*, “I think there is a place for using the app, but not in the workplace where it takes no account of the measures that we’ve put in place to restrict transmission.”

Pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline told its employees not to use the app at work. According to a *BBC News* article, some teachers were ordered not to have the app activated while at work.

An article published by the *People Management* website on January 13 detailed the results of a poll commissioned by building technologies group Honeywell and conducted by the Wakefield Research group at the end of last year. It reported “nearly three-quarters (71 percent) of respondents did not feel completely safe in their workplace, with half (51 per cent) worried about contracting coronavirus by coming into contact with contaminated surfaces.

“The research, which polled 500 UK workers who are usually based in large buildings with 500 or more people, also found that just 45 per cent of workplaces had safety protocols in place such as social distancing and mandatory mask wearing.”

An *hrmagazine* article of January 2, “Companies risking lives by bending lockdown rules” explained, “A survey carried out by the Royal Society for Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce (RSA)... found that one in nine workers said they had been ordered back to their workplace when they could have worked from home.”

Many on low incomes who should self-isolate are not doing so because they fear the financial consequences. The government’s own polling published Friday found that only 17 percent of people with symptoms are coming forward to get a Covid test, as they fear a loss of income if they stop work. Workers in the UK receive just £95.85 per week in Statutory Sick Pay.

The *Observer* newspaper reported January 17 that “no enforcement notices have been served on

companies by Health and Safety Executive (HSE) inspectors for Covid safety breaches since the country went into the latest lockdown, despite being contacted 2,945 times about workplace safety issues between 6 and 14 January. Overall, just 0.1% of the nearly 97,000 Covid safety cases dealt with by the agency during the pandemic appear to have resulted in an improvement or prohibition safety notice, with not a single company prosecuted for Covid-related breaches of safety laws.”

As well as non-essential workers forced into work, workers in essential jobs such as food production are not getting the necessary protection and can be at significant risk of COVID-19 infection. According to a European Centre for Disease Control and Prevention report produced last year, the food processing sector had the third highest rate of COVID-19 outbreaks after hospitals and care homes.

Last September, Leeds based law firm Walker Morris issued a report on COVID-19 outbreaks in food factories. Professor of Molecular Oncology at the University of Warwick, Lawrence Young said, “Factories and, in particular, indoor areas which are cold and damp, are perfect environments for coronavirus to linger and spread. Virus-containing droplets from infected individuals are more likely to spread, settle and stay viable.”

Noise in such plants meant workers had to shout, promoting the spread of infected droplets. The report noted, “A lot of these factories have on-site or nearby accommodation where there are several people in each dormitory. The workers may be transported on a bus to the site of work, where they then spend all day together indoors and again in the evening.”

Corporations get away with operating unsafe workplaces not simply due to the toothless HSE enforcement regime, but because they can count on the trade unions to do nothing to oppose their nefarious practises. Workers must take matter into their own hands and form rank and file safety committees, independent of the unions, to safeguard their health and lives as the COVID-19 pandemic worsens.



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