

“The company is bringing in inmates from the jailhouse with Covid”

## Workers report deadly Covid outbreak at Arkansas Lennox plant

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*On Sunday, October 24, The World Socialist Web Site will host an online event featuring a panel of scientists, to explain how COVID-19 can be eradicated and the pandemic finally brought to an end. We urge all those concerned about the situation in Arkansas to register today.*

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Workers at the Lennox Industry plant in Stuttgart, Arkansas, are reporting that COVID-19 infections are spreading throughout the factory, which is located about 55 miles from Little Rock. Many of the workers have been infected with COVID-19 and at least five have died, workers told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Approximately 1,400 workers are at the 750,000 square-foot facility. Workers are reportedly laboring 12 hours a day, seven days a week, in sweltering heat because the factory, which manufactures air conditioners, does not have adequate air conditioning. The company also builds expensive home air purification systems, which it boasts “removes more than “99% of virus particles, including the common cold, influenza and viruses 4x smaller than SARS-CoV-2.”

Gina, a worker from Little Rock with family members at the plant, said a relative died from COVID-19 in August. “She did not get a chance to be vaccinated and was sent home sick on a Thursday and was dead by Saturday,” she said.

Another family member who was vaccinated, Gina said, was currently in the Intensive Care Unit with COVID-19 because local hospitals had no beds, and they had to transfer him to a hospital in North Little Rock. “My baby sister has two kids with the virus, and they don’t have beds to put them in. I called the CDC and told them that place needs to be shut down. What my family is telling me is unreal. The company pays judges to get inmates out of jail to work at the Lennox plant. They’re coming from the jailhouse with Covid and spreading it in the plant.”

She continued, “My family members are afraid to open their mouths, and one is about to die. People are afraid to

speak up because they are worried about being fired. Lennox is paying judges to keep it open. These people should be exposed.”

This reporter called management at the factory to get a response to the report of multiple Covid deaths at the factory and the use of prison inmates. After being transferred by an operator, an unnamed company official hung up the phone as soon as the questions were posed to him. The WSWS also called the company’s media relations spokesman in Richardson, Texas, for a response but got no reply as of the time of this writing. Several inquiries to the Little Rock office of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) also elicited no response.

The state of Arkansas, with a population of just over 3 million, has more than 475,001 individual cases or approximately 16 percent of the state’s populace. The disease has already claimed more than 7,142 lives. Arkansas County, where Stuttgart is located, has five coronavirus deaths and 3,250 positive cases of a population of less than 18,000, according to the Arkansas Department of Health.

The state is the home to multi-billion-dollar conglomerates Tyson Foods and Walmart, which have long controlled the state’s politicians, including former governor Bill Clinton. At least 12,000 Tyson workers have been infected across the country and 38 have died, according to a class-action lawsuit filed last February.

Dallas-based Lennox Industries employs approximately 11,350 people at its headquarters and R&D facilities in Texas and factories in Marshalltown, Iowa; Stuttgart, Arkansas, and Saltillo, Mexico. According to Owlser.com, Lennox has an annual revenue of \$4.1 billion. Over the last four quarters, the company’s revenue grew by 17.4 percent, particularly in Q2 of 2021, when it reached \$1.2 billion, up \$269.5 million from the previous quarter.

According to Indeed.com, an assembler at the Lennox plant makes \$13.50 an hour with a \$100 per quarter bonus for perfect attendance during the deadly pandemic. Many

workers, however, are temps earning \$10 an hour. By contrast, CEO Todd M. Bludorn pocketed \$13.2 million last year and has a net worth of at least \$132 million. Bludorn owns more than 10,000 units of Lennox stock worth over \$17,821,373, according to WallMine.com and has stock totaling more than \$100,275,641 over the past fourteen years.

Comments by workers, listed on the job review website Indeed.com highlight the sweatshop conditions at the Stuttgart plant. One from August said, "Management thinks they can talk to you any type of way. The air conditioning in the building does not work properly. The company is so short staffed that most employees are working 5 or more jobs and being moved to different lines every day. The[y] lie about all raises and there are too many relationships going on between employees and supervisors."

Another said, "The leadership at Lennox International is very poor ... For example, they do not communicate with the employees, they change policies without telling employees, and they are trying to keep covid infections in the dark from employees."

Still another said, "Lennox only cares about management. They work us 6-7 days and treat employees horrible."

"Breaks and lunches are too short, get warning and written warning if a few seconds late," another review said. "Too much favoritism, management singles out certain employees... not me but have seen it done to others. Fear of getting injured, you will get fired almost regardless how long you been there regardless of the situation. You work seven days a week during peak season with no days off. Not family friendly."

And just this Wednesday, another reviewer posted, "This company make central heat and air units, but the plant stays around 94 degrees and then you wear PPE. The work isn't hard, but the environment and policy are terrible. They change rules to fit whatever they want to hold some people accountable and let others get away with everything. They put too much pressure on some making work terrible."

"Pros: I can't think of a single thing."

"Cons: Everything!! Overworked under paid for the environment and not ever having a life"

In 2019, OSHA, according to its website, issued Lennox a slap-on-the-wrist "Initial Penalty" of \$26,520 following an amputation at the Stuttgart plant. The company appealed the fine and OSHA reduced it to \$7,956.

Lennox is one of the many large corporations that have made lucrative profits during the pandemic even as more than 670,000 people have died in the US. Introducing its air filtration system last March, John Whinery, the Vice President of Product for Lennox Industries, released a statement, saying, "We understand that indoor air quality is a

higher priority now more than ever before. While COVID-19 has changed the world around us, it hasn't changed our unwavering commitment to delivering consistently clean, comfortable air to homeowners through our Lennox Healthy Climate™ and Ultimate Comfort System™ indoor air quality products.'

The cost of a PureAir and PureAir S air purification system runs a minimum of \$850.00 and \$1,250.00 respectively, money the primary victims of COVID-19 do not have, let alone workers at Lennox's manufacturing plants in Arkansas.

"This place needs to be shut down," Gina told the WWS. "People's lives are at stake. This is unreal, people have never lived through something like this. The politicians are going to do nothing, it is going to take the people to stop this pandemic."

"If this don't make you angry, nothing will." Referring to the impact of Hurricane Ida in Louisiana and on the East Coast, she said, "Old people don't have lights. Biden went down there, but did he take electricians or airplanes to evacuate people?"

"Arkansas and these other states are seeing a record number of infections and hospitalizations. My sister works in the school district and on weekends in a children hospital. They have children laying in the hallway on oxygen machines, kids. They won't close the schools down. The kids are coming back and giving it to their parents. They send the kids home with a Zpac of antibiotics, but this virus is no joke. It's trying to kill us."

She concluded, "The politicians and the unions won't do what is necessary. It has to [be] done by the working class. We need to get our masks on and get into the streets and shut this down. We need to get nurses and doctors on board to eradicate this."



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