

More COVID-19 deaths reported at Lennox Industries plant in Stuttgart, Arkansas

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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.

Workers at the Lennox Industries plant in Stuttgart, Arkansas, report that at least two more workers have died from COVID-19 infections since the *World Socialist Web Site* published a September 14 exposé about the deadly outbreak at the factory. Workers and their relatives have told the WSWS that a total of seven workers at the plant, located 55 miles southeast of Little Rock, have succumbed to the disease.

Lennox Industries produces climate control products for the heating, ventilation, air conditioning and refrigeration markets. The company and plant management have refused to confirm these reports or charges by workers that Lennox was using inmates from COVID-infected jails to fill in for missing workers. Local management hung up the phone on this reporter, and the public relations department for the Dallas, Texas-based corporation has not responded to our inquiries. Similarly, the WSWS has gotten no response from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) offices in Little Rock.

Workers at the plant, however, welcomed the exposure of the conditions they face, and several printed and distributed hundreds of copies of the original WSWS article to their fellow workers and family members. “The workers said the article was great. Management threatened to fire anyone who they caught reading it. So most went out on their lunchbreak to read it. The workers say the company started vaccine shots shortly after the article came out.”

Thousands of workers have also read the WSWS article online. After reading it, a worker at the Stuttgart plant who recently quit because of the callous response of management to outbreaks of infections at the plant emailed the WSWS, saying, “The day I walked out, the supervisor for the line came up to me and the crew leader and told us that there was a COVID outbreak on two lines, and about 30 people had it. They evacuated all management, all human resources, all of payroll, all supervisors and the two lines that were infected. They told the rest of us and the crew leader we had to stay there and work, that it was up to us for the next week to come to work and get everything done while they all got to go home for a week.

“The crew leader said to the production manager, ‘What the hell, man, y’all just gonna leave us here?’ The production manager said, ‘Sorry, but we got kids and wives to look after,’ like everybody else’s don’t matter. So, I packed my stuff and walked out. I wasn’t about to be left there with an ongoing outbreak because they care more about the higher-ups than the blue-collar workers. If they didn’t have the blue-collar workers, they wouldn’t have a factory, but they just look at us like toilet paper, easy to get more and for them to crap on. I quit because of the way they treated me.”

Even before the pandemic, the worker said, management exhibited an utter disregard for the health and safety of workers. “When people get hurt out there, they will either fire or treat you like junk to make you quit. So, when people get hurt, they try to hide it and keep working. I was a run test operator and ran the risk of getting electrocuted, which I did on a few occasions, and I hid it.”

The factory, which manufactures air conditioners, also has no air conditioning for its workers. In addition to the sweltering heat, there are also mosquitos, roaches

and other pests in the plant. When there was a bomb threat at the plant, the worker reported, management evacuated the building but “sent us back within 30 minutes without even calling the fire department to secure the place.”

Commenting on OSHA’s failure to respond to WSWS inquiries about a COVID outbreak at the plant, the former worker said, “The reason OSHA won’t comment or respond to y’all is because OSHA is paid off at the door before they ever get to walk the factory. If OSHA ever did get to walk the plant, they would shut it down immediately,” he said.

It is clear Lennox prioritizes profits over lives. It has made a bundle during the pandemic. Announcing the company’s last quarterly results in July, Lennox CEO Todd Bluedorn boasted, “Lennox International posted record revenues and profits in the second quarter with strong growth across all three of our businesses. Our Residential business set new highs for revenue, margin and profit. Revenue rose 30 percent on strong growth in both replacement and new construction business. Segment margin expanded 290 basis points to 22.6 percent, and profit rose 49 percent.”

According to a company release Lennox made a record \$222 million in the second quarter. It also announced a plan to repurchase \$200 million of stock to drive up the company’s share price and a 19 percent dividend increase for its wealthy shareholders. Last year, Bluedorn pocketed \$7.6 million in compensation, or 271 times the \$28,000 annual wage a machine operator earns at the Stuttgart plant. Bluedorn makes 1,542 times the annual \$4,928 salary of (101,616 pesos) the highest paid manufacturing workers at Lennox’s Saltillo, Mexico plant.

The company exploits the high level of poverty and economic desperation to fill its factories. Stuttgart, with a population of 8,232, has a poverty rate of 17.9 percent (1,480 people), while Arkansas County, of which Stuttgart is located, has 3,372 (18.82 percent) COVID-19 cases and 56 deaths. The county has a total population of 17,914, as of 2019 census report.

Lennox executives and its wealthiest shareholders are pandemic profiteers—who have enriched themselves while over 700,000 people in the US and 277,000 in Mexico have died, including an unknown number of workers in its sweatshops.

In March, John Whinery, the vice president of

product management for Lennox, boasted about the release of a new line of high-cost air purifiers, which he said would protect homeowners and their families from COVID. “With the COVID-19 pandemic keeping homeowners indoors more than ever, clean air has never been more important. That’s why I’m especially excited and proud to announce that, after months of rigorous testing, the PureAir™ and PureAir™ S Air Purification Systems, with the Lennox Healthy Climate™ Carbon Clean 16® air filter, remove over 99 percent of the virus that causes COVID-19 from the air. When it comes to the safety and comfort of homeowners and families, we don’t take our role lightly, and we hope this announcement serves as further evidence of our unwavering dedication to whole-home purification for perfect air.”

The company’s executives and corporate management have little concern about cleaning the air workers have to breathe at the Stuttgart factory and its other manufacturing facilities. It is up to workers to act to defend their lives and the lives of their loved ones.

The WSWS urges workers to form a rank-and-file safety committee to communicate with each other, bring out the truth and prepare collective action, if necessary, to force the closure of the factory and protect the health and safety of all workers.

We urge Lennox workers and other workers facing similar conditions to email us at comments@wsws.org to provide confidential information about conditions and to discuss how to build a rank-and-file safety committee. We will take all precautions necessary to protect the identity of those workers who contact us in order protect them from retaliation.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact