

Flooding of Abbott baby formula factory in Michigan forces new shutdown amid severe national shortage

Kevin Reed
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Less than two weeks after it reopened the largest baby formula factory in the US, Abbott Laboratories announced on Wednesday that severe thunderstorms and flooding caused by backed-up storm sewers in Sturgis, Michigan, forced the operation to be shut down again “for a few weeks.”

A company press statement said that “high winds, hail, power outages and flood damage throughout the area” resulted in flooding in parts of Sturgis, “including areas of our plant.” As with everything related to the catastrophic baby formula shortage and the bacteria-infested and unsanitary conditions at the Sturgis factory, Abbott Labs—which generates \$7 billion in profits annually—never takes responsibility for anything other than making money for its investors.

The company did not bother to explain how it is possible for heavy rains to flood its primary pediatric nutritionals production facility. The press statement went on to say that Abbott Labs halted manufacture of its “EleCare specialty formula that was underway” in order to assess the damage and “clean and re-sanitize the plant.”

As though the public should accept assurances from the company and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) that everything is going to be just fine in Sturgis, the statement says Abbott Labs has informed the federal government agency and “will conduct comprehensive testing in conjunction with the independent third party to ensure the plant is safe to resume production.”

The statement does not say who the third party is or what they will do to ensure safe and sanitary production at the plant. This is the same factory that was belatedly closed by the FDA last February after an inspection

found the presence of standing water, roof leaks and mold in various locations, including within the machinery where the powdered baby formula is produced.

It was precisely this water in areas of the Sturgis factory that should always be kept dry that became an environment for the growth of deadly bacteria, such as *Cronobacter* and salmonella, that were found to be the cause of illness and death among children who consumed Abbott Labs products in late 2021 and early 2022.

The company and the FDA are maintaining that there is no proven connection between the cases of infection and deaths among infants and the presence of bacteria at the Sturgis plant. However, the latest events do prove that the company and the government are disinterested in maintaining the infrastructure necessary to prevent the flooding of the critical baby formula factory.

Attempting to shirk any blame for this new man-made disaster, the Abbott Labs statement referred only to heavy rains overwhelming “the city’s stormwater system.” The city issued its own statement on Wednesday and said that the flooding at the factory “likely was a combination” of the city’s system being at capacity and being “unable to receive any additional water from the Abbott site,” as well as “Abbott’s onsite system being pushed to capacity.”

It is a fact that the corporations in the US baby formula industry have been reducing product safety for years with the collaboration of the FDA. According to a recent report in *The Intercept*, “Records show that the industry successfully mobilized against a 2014 proposal from the FDA to increase regular safety inspections of plants used to manufacture baby formula.”

Eight years ago, the FDA proposed measures to prevent contamination of baby formula with bacteria, but this plan was rejected by an industry association called the International Formula Council (IFC), now known as the Infant Council of America (ICA), because it would eat into corporate profits.

The group wrote a letter to the FDA saying that compliance with the new rules would cost the industry \$20 million annually, and, therefore, “The IFC believes that the additional requirements for end of shelf-life testing under the Final Rule are unnecessary and burdensome and do not provide any additional public health benefit.” Instead of protecting the interests of the public, according to *The Intercept*, the FDA incorporated rules that “reduced the frequency of stability testing for new infant formulas from every three months to every four months.”

Meanwhile, as families continue to scramble to find formula, the monopolies that control the US industry—Abbott Labs, Mead Johnson, Perrigo and Nestle—are raking in record profits. According to data provided by IBISWorld to *Axios*, profit margins in 2022 are 14.2 percent as opposed to 11.6 percent in 2021. IBISWorld said, “While the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted supply chains and caused input costs to increase, high demand for formula and high market share concentration have allowed manufacturers to increase prices and maintain profit.”

Abbott Labs—the giant nutritional corporation, which paid its CEO and Chairman of the Board Robert Ford more than \$22 million in 2021—and the rest of baby formula industry have demonstrated that the health and well-being of infants and children are not within their list of priorities, which are exclusively focused on financial performance and stock buybacks.

The same is true of the Biden administration and the US Congress who have made it clear that war against Russia in Ukraine is much more important than the ability of families to locate baby formula, which is now 11 percent more expensive than it was one year ago.

Workers at the Sturgis, Michigan, factory of Abbott Labs can place no confidence in the company that has repeatedly demonstrated that it is incapable and disinterested in maintaining the standards necessary to produce high quality and safe baby food. A rank-and-file factory committee that is independent of the company, the unions and the government must be

organized at the plant.

This committee must begin the fight—as part of the expanding struggles of the working class in every industry—to place the production of baby formula under workers’ control based on the needs of families and not the profits of Wall Street. Putting an end to the baby formula shortage requires a struggle against the capitalist system and for socialism.



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