

Kalamazoo, Michigan: “I don’t like the idea of selling my blood plasma for money, but I have to do what I’ve got to do”

US blood plasma industry targets poor and working class

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As living conditions for workers in the United States continue to decline rapidly under the weight of decades of wage stagnation and bipartisan cuts to social spending, increasing numbers of US workers are turning to selling their blood plasma in order to cover basic necessities. Billions of dollars in profits are being made in an industry that quite literally thrives on sucking the blood from workers and the poor.

The US blood plasma industry has grown significantly in recent years, from just over \$5 billion in global sales in 2000 to over \$21 billion in 2017. According to a Market Research Engine forecast, the industry is on track to cross \$44 billion by 2024.

Global demand for blood plasma has risen in part due to its irreplaceable role in many important medical therapies, including for patients with antibody deficiencies and hemophilia. Blood plasma can only be obtained from donors and cannot be artificially replicated.

Roughly 70 to 80 percent of global plasma supply is provided by paid donors from the United States, which, unlike the United Kingdom and other developed nations, does not ban the practice of paying donors for their blood. The United States also has fewer restrictions on how often someone can donate plasma, with donors permitted to undergo the process twice a week, every week, all year long.

Plasma donations in the United States have tripled from 12 million per year in 2006 to 38 million per year in 2016, according to the Plasma Protein Therapeutics Association. At the same time, the number of donation centers has doubled, from 300 sites in 2015 to more than 600 today.

Blood plasma donation takes a serious toll on the health of the donor, especially for long-term, repeated donors. After a blood draw, donors can experience weakness, bruising, dehydration or fainting. A 2010 study found that frequent paid donors have lower levels of proteins in their blood,

increasing their risk of infection and liver and kidney disorders.

While providing plasma to those in need is a social necessity, the capitalist private profit system has endowed the practice with distinctly parasitic characteristics. The global plasma supply is provided largely by the poorest sections of the working class, driven to sell off parts of their bodies in order to make ends meet.

A 2018 study by researchers at Case Western Reserve University found that states with a higher number of plasma donation centers were also more likely to have a higher population of low-income and minimum-wage workers. The study also found a higher prevalence of donation centers in states with less cash assistance available to low-income individuals. One researcher, Heather Olsen, stated that plasma donation companies are “surgically placing” donation centers in destitute neighborhoods.

Additionally, the study noted that, due to inadequate health care coverage, “Significant numbers of donors...would not be able to afford the lifesaving therapies created by their own plasma contributions.”

A survey conducted by the Case Western researchers at a donation center in Cleveland, Ohio, found that 57 percent of donors surveyed make more than a third of their monthly income from donating plasma. Fully 70 percent have experienced a side effect from donation. When asked what donors spend the money on, which can be as little as \$30 to \$50 for a donation that can be sold for \$300 on the wholesale market, respondents said they largely spent money on basic necessities such as food, gas and rent.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with donors at a donation center in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Brandon is a working-class college student who uses the donation money to cover basic necessities. “It’s an easy way to get money for the rent,” he said. “At the school I go to,

I'm in class with CEOs' daughters and all of that. So as a blue-collar kid, I'm a minority. My financial aid is good, but not good enough. I need to find other ways to get the money, and plasma is an easy way to do it.

"I've been donating to this center for a couple months," Brandon continued. "Back home, I was doing it for about a year. Coming from a working-class family and being a first-generation college student, there's a lot of what-ifs and unknowns. You've got to find the money where it is.

"Obviously, this is a huge industry. Unfortunately, there's not much I can do. What they give me for what I donate is what they give me. Would I like more of the pie, especially since it's literally me giving a part of myself? Yes. I'm well aware that I'm getting ripped off for this, but money is money. And obviously I don't have much of it."

Brandon spoke of how social inequality drives workers and youth like himself to become plasma donors. "I go to school with a lot of upper-class kids. And even though they have so much, they still fight and claw for more. It's capitalism. The upper class succeeds. The rest of us fight like hell. The political spectrum is set up to where the rich get richer and where the working class have to suffer. A lot of bills that Congress passes favor the rich, even though promises are made throughout the campaigns that they're going to help the working class. But it's going to take a lot more than one person to change that."

Izzy is a student at Western Michigan University who works in the food service industry. She recently had her hours cut, so she is selling her blood plasma to cover necessities. "I use the extra money on gas, groceries, things like that," she said. "I know for some people, though, it's like a job, and they earn a living from donation. It's sad but true. My friend works here, and she sees the same people every week.

"There's a whole profit scheme," Izzy continued. "They give us so little, but they get so much. It's like a typical medical industry stunt. It's the same thing with big pharma. They want you to get addicted to opioids so they sell more of them. They want your plasma because it's expensive. But they don't want to pay you, so they go to the poorest places and pay the least amount they can."

Izzy noted the contradiction between providing a socially necessary service and the way that service is exploited for profit. "I feel okay about donating in some respects. There are pregnant mothers who need plasma, babies who need it, and kids who need it. But at the same time, I hate that I'm feeding into the big pharmacy companies."

Mark recently moved to Kalamazoo from Flint, Michigan. "Currently I'm waiting for a call back from a job," he said. "Money is tight, so I came here to donate so I could get gas and food, some hygiene things, basic needs like that. I don't

donate very often, but I do it when I'm in a serious need. I don't like donating, because I don't like the idea of selling my blood plasma for money. But I have to do what I've got to do, really."

Mark spoke about the social conditions in Flint, which has been ravaged by decades of industrialization and the enduring water crisis. "It's horrible in Flint. It's a ghost town. There's abandoned places everywhere, abandoned houses. There's drug addicts, drug dealers, shootings, missing kids. The whole area is bad. There's no jobs at all. The only jobs that are really good are factory jobs, but the factory jobs don't pay what they actually should. GM is barely paying anything.

"We're not robots. We're not just people you can give a job to and just lay off. We have lives. We have families. We have kids. We depend on jobs."

Quwanda has been donating blood plasma for over 10 years. She said that she has been fighting to get better pay for donors. "For a long time, when I'd go to the center I would talk to the managers about getting us more pay. It does take a lot out of us when we come out of there. We are giving our immune system away. I understand completely the whole process and what they're using it for. I worked as a nurse for 20 years. I've always thought that we should be getting more money, especially with what they're getting paid from our plasma."

She spoke of the debilitating effects that frequent donation has on her physical health. "I've experienced a lot of weakness. It drains you. Even on a sick day, when you really need some money, you come in here. You're at your worst when you come out. That's basically what you have to deal with if you need to get by."

"I've done plasma donation in a lot of different cities and states," she said. "Every place is different, but they still pay very low. The economy doesn't help any, and gas is high. So you have to get it from somewhere. We get gas money from here. If we need Pampers, milk for the baby, toiletries, that's what we'll come in here for. I think more people might come if they were giving more money. A lot of times I do feel sick and queasy afterwards. I eat and drink plenty of water, but it's the simple fact that they're taking your immune system. It's draining."



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