

COVID-19 rages through food processing plants, warehouses and manufacturing facilities

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The coronavirus continues to spread through factories, warehouses and other workplaces as the number of COVID-19 cases rises sharply in US states that have reopened businesses and abandoned social distancing guidelines.

Twenty-nine states and US territories logged an increase in their seven-day average of new reported cases on Monday, with nine states—California, Texas, Arizona, Nevada, Oklahoma, Utah, Florida, South Carolina and Georgia—reporting record average highs. Disturbingly, many of the new cases are among younger people, with the median age for newly diagnosed coronavirus cases in Florida falling to 37.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported yesterday, Florida's agricultural regions—where migrant workers pick fruit and vegetables next to each other and are crammed into crowded busses, trailers and apartments—have been major vectors for the spread of the deadly disease.

Immokalee, Florida, the country's winter tomato capital, has 1,207 reported cases. With the harvest season over, thousands of migrant workers are now making their way up the East Coast and to the Midwest, with many of them taking the virus to Georgia, North Carolina, Michigan and other states.

The meatpacking industry continues to be the largest spreader of COVID-19. It is estimated that more than 24,000 workers have been infected and at least 91, including more than 25 at facilities owned by Tyson Foods, have died. Both figures have increased five-fold since Trump used the Defense Production Act to reopen infected slaughterhouses and meat processing plants in late April.

In North Carolina, where cases were found in at least 23 meat processing plants, the *Raleigh News & Observer* noted the comments of State Representative Jimmy Dixon, a staunch ally of the hog industry. During a recent committee meeting he said a policy of "herd immunity" would be better for the economy. "We'd better start addressing the

economic health of this state," he said. "In my opinion, we're all going to get [COVID-19], and the sooner we get it the better off we are."

The wave of infections in the meatpacking industry is a global phenomenon, with major outbreaks last week in Wales in the UK, in Germany, where officials said 1,331 workers tested positive at a Tönnies Group slaughterhouse in North Rhine-Westphalia, and in Brazil, where almost 24 percent of all COVID-19 cases in Brazil's southern Rio Grande do Sul state are workers in the meat industry.

The construction industry, which was exempted from lockdowns in many states or prematurely opened in others, is another hotspot. Fifty-five out of the 153 construction workers at a site on the Texas A&M campus in College Station, Texas, tested positive last week.

Construction workers building new stadiums or renovating old ones for professional football teams are also contracting the disease. This includes at least 18 workers at the SoFi Stadium construction site in Los Angeles; 15 workers at the Allegiant Stadium site in Las Vegas; and at least 32 of the 275 construction workers at the renovation site for the Mercedes Benz Superdome in New Orleans—which Louisiana's Democratic governor, John Bel Edwards, has declared "essential."

In Santa Clara County, in the San Francisco Bay Area, there were 10 confirmed cases and more than 30 potential exposures reported at one Mountain View construction site, near Google headquarters, along with several other cases at San Jose and Milpitas construction sites.

Restaurant, retail and public transit workers are in peril as major cities reopen. Some 300,000 people are expected to return to work in New York City this week, as city and state officials allow the reopening of outdoor dining at bars and restaurants, in-person retail, hair salons and barber shops and more office-based jobs. Although subway ridership is only 17 percent of pre-pandemic levels, it is being ramped up under conditions where more than 130 transit workers have

died from COVID-19.

Large crowds are expected for the July 4 weekend at casinos in New Jersey and Las Vegas, Nevada. Cases spiked in Nevada after the initial reopening of casinos in early June. Two employees at the Flamingo Casino tested positive last week, along with at least eight restaurant employees on and off the Strip.

Outbreaks of the disease have also hit major factories and warehouses. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has announced that it will investigate conditions at Amazon facilities in Kenosha, Wisconsin, where at least 60 workers have tested positive. The giant corporation, whose CEO Jeff Bezos has gotten \$33 billion richer since the pandemic began, has sought to conceal information about the spread of the virus, but former Amazon employee Jana Jump has compiled a list of nearly 1,600 infections and at least nine deaths in Ohio, California, Missouri, New York, Texas, Illinois and Indiana. She recently told the WSWS, "This is just the tip of the iceberg."

The auto industry, which reopened on May 18, continues to see outbreaks. BMW has acknowledged 14 cases at its Spartanburg, South Carolina facility, and Toyota has confirmed 40 cases at its US plants, including in Georgetown, Kentucky. Previously, Hyundai acknowledged one death at its Montgomery, Alabama plant.

At General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler, the corporate management of the Detroit Three automakers, with the full backing of the United Auto Workers union, has concealed information about the spread of the virus in an effort to prevent a repeat of the walkouts and other job actions by workers that shut down the industry in mid-March.

Workers at GM's Wentzville, Missouri plant, just outside of St. Louis, have reported to the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* that at least 10 coworkers have tested positive. "When a manager tested positive, 36 people in trim walked out," one worker said. "They ended up staying out for three days so that they could get tested. It's resulted in a lot of manpower issues."

A worker at GM's Ft. Wayne, Indiana plant, which produces the company's most profitable vehicles, reported, "People are gradually getting sick and it's moving closer to my area. GM isn't telling us real numbers. I know people that are sick and are home for quarantine. The UAW is also looking the other way. Today there were so many that were sent to the hospital to get tested that we couldn't run the first half. The results take 2-3 days! No one wants to talk about the numbers. They even told us that people just had the flu ... Secretive here."

Workers in the auto parts industry also described their unsafe workplaces. "Conditions at Flex N Gate LLC of Battle Creek are bad," said one worker. "We have cleaners

who are supposed to be sanitizing the plant each shift, all shift, with alcohol, but on 3rd shift that's not really likely. The cleaner isn't using the alcohol, but is just wiping things with a rag! They have super-stupid one-way directions and the heat is unbearable in there, but yet we still have to wear a mask! They won't clean the fans that they put out on the floor! We only have limited cold water! This sucks, as workers have to go in there and risk our health and safety just for some cars and trucks that most likely won't even be purchased anytime soon."

In an effort to counter large absenteeism rates among auto, meatpacking and other workers who do not want to infect themselves and their families, companies are restricting sick leave policies, and the Trump administration has announced it will not renew the \$600 a week supplement to unemployment benefits when it runs out the week ending July 25. The removal of the subsidy, which many workers, including undocumented immigrants, never received, would throw millions of families into destitution.

Amidst the moves to cut off the \$600-a-week lifeline to workers, both parties have handed over trillions of dollars to Wall Street and other giant corporations by passing the CARES Act in near-unanimous votes and sanctioning the Federal Reserve's purchase of corporate bonds. Both corporate-controlled parties are now herding workers back into the factories and other workplaces to produce the profits needed to pay for the vast increase in government and corporate debt.

There is growing opposition to this homicidal policy and the plans to use the pandemic and the creation a vast pool of jobless workers to accelerate the assault on the jobs, wages and conditions of workers. In opposition to this, the Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to elect rank-and-file committees in every factory and workplace to unite workers across the US and internationally in an industrial and political counteroffensive to protect lives and living standards. The fight for safe workplaces requires a fight against the capitalist system, which sacrifices workers' lives to corporate profit.



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