

Dozens of Nashville, Tennessee, construction workers test positive for COVID-19

By Warren Duzak
25 May 2020

In a large cluster of COVID-19 infections, 74 construction workers at an exclusive Tennessee prep school building site have tested positive for the coronavirus.

Workers for General Contractor Brasfield & Gorrie and the company's subcontractors at the Montgomery Bell Academy's athletic facility construction site have tested positive for the virus, Metropolitan Nashville's Health Department confirmed last week.

The first positive test was confirmed earlier this month, NewsChannel 5 reported. According to the television station, an email revealed that by May 18, 329 workers at the site had been tested with 60 confirmed cases.

There was no information on the condition of the workers or their families or if there had been any deaths. The Birmingham-based construction supplied only a boilerplate press release professing its concern for the safety of workers and the great lengths it is going to protect everyone.

A large sign at the construction site's main entrance had an image of a worker attired in a highly visible bright yellow-chartreuse shirt and wearing protective glasses and hardhat. He was not wearing a mask. Nowhere on the sign was there any mention of a COVID-19 warning or any requirements or even suggestions for masks or social distancing. If there were such signs, none were readily visible.

But on the fence there was a sign cautioning, "Drones May Be Operating In This Area."

At about the same time as the Tennessee cases were revealed, another Alabama-based general contractor briefly shut down operations at a University of Alabama construction site when 10 confirmed cases among workers there were reported.

Caddell Construction of Montgomery, Alabama, is

the general contractor on the \$106 million renovation work at the University of Alabama's Bryant-Denny Stadium in Tuscaloosa.

As in the Nashville case, the construction company was tight-lipped on the condition of workers or their families even after details of the infection were reported.

"More than 10 people have tested positive for COVID-19, according to people familiar with the outbreak, but the number could be much higher," Joseph Goodman of AL.com reported. "With so many exposures, there is a fear that more positive cases linked to the job site are inevitable. The large number of positive tests means, essentially, everyone at the job site could have been exposed."

The COVID-19 outbreak at the Alabama stadium follows an accident which severely injured two workers there in late January.

Two men were almost killed when two concrete beams fell and struck the construction vehicle they were in. One news source described one worker as paralyzed with a second worker suffering severe head injuries.

Brasfield & Gorrie reported having about 2,600 employees in 2016, and revenue of \$2.4 billion. It ranked #30 in the nation's top 400 contractors for 2017, according to *Engineering News-Record*. It also ranked third in healthcare general contractors in the nation, *Modern Healthcare* reported.

Caddell Construction is roughly one tenth the size of Brasfield & Gorrie in terms of employees and revenues.

The two Alabama-based construction companies share more than a home state.

Both companies are working on sports facilities and are under intense pressure to get the job done before

the fall sports season. College and even high school sports are multi-million dollar businesses and are treated that way. The University of Alabama football program, for instance, brings in about \$47 million in profits on \$108 million of total revenues. The college football season is set to begin in September.

In Nashville, the MBA private school—with tuition at \$27,250 a year—touts sports as one of the legs on its three-legged student products: “Gentleman, Scholar, Athlete.”

A Channel 5 reporter asked one worker at the MBA worksite, “Why don’t you just walk off the job?”

The answer from one worker was simple. “Because you can’t get unemployment if you just quit,” he replied. “So I have to provide for my family.”

Another worker responded plainly but accurately. “You just rely on people whose profit is at stake on telling you whether to go forward or not.”

Similar answers could be given by workers in all different countries.

“I have no other choice. It doesn’t seem normal to have to return to work, but we have no other option,” a construction locksmith in Spain told the media. “I have to continue covering expenses.”

A Madrid bricklayer complained, “I don’t know why the hell we have to go back if there is no way of keeping distance from each other.” “I only hope that my colleagues also work with a mask. If not, we’re screwed.”

In China, courageous and self-sacrificing construction workers build a hospital in two weeks, but in the words of one Chinese worker: “We are all abandoned tools after use.”

“Don’t let the voice of praise fill my screen,” he said on social media of government praise. “There is still a lot of injustice and exploitation in the world.”

A comment from a Turkish construction worker was poignant.

“The conditions on our job site are deplorable, and I feel psychologically broken with worrying that I might infect other people, especially my wife or my 8-year-old son,” Özkan told equaltimes.org about his life as a construction worker in Istanbul, Turkey. “We don’t have any way to disinfect ourselves on the site, so as soon as I get home, I go straight to the bathroom to take a shower. I can’t kiss my son, I can only greet him from afar.”

In the United States, even though construction is considered an essential activity, construction workers look to lose almost 1 million jobs.

“The latest labor figures point to a precipitous drop in construction jobs across the United States,” archpaper.com reported May 8. “975,000 construction workers lost their jobs in April, with specialty trade contractors bearing the worst losses (691,000 jobs), while building construction lost 206,100.”

What may be most galling to many construction workers is the prospect of putting their truly essential lives on the line to earn a living for themselves and their families by building non-essential structures.

In recent weeks, the Nashville Business Journal (NBJ) reported financing for the building of two huge office buildings costing more than \$100 million each.

A third \$100 million project gives conspicuous consumption new meaning.

The Motor Enclave’s target audience, the developer told the Nashville Business Journal, is “simple”—people love cars—and he will build “car condos” that start at \$180,000 with the average price at \$350,000 for a 1,200-square-foot condo that can “comfortably” fit four to six cars.

“Some will be built specifically to accommodate recreational vehicles and car trailers, and those units will be priced between \$700,000 and \$800,000.” The developers told the NBJ the money invested in these three projects in Nashville, Tennessee, would more than pay for the \$237 million the US is assessed by the World Health Organization, which is leading the fight against COVID-19.

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