

Hundreds of new COVID-19 infections in German meat industry

By Marianne Arens
20 June 2020

The latest coronavirus outbreak at the Tönnies abattoir in Rheda-Wiedenbrück in the Gütersloh district is the largest since the beginning of the pandemic. By Thursday, more than two-thirds of the meatpacking workers there were found to be infected with COVID-19: of 1,050 initial test results, 730 were positive.

This new hotspot at a slaughterhouse demonstrates the brutal conditions in the meatpacking industry under conditions of private, capitalist ownership. Hundreds of workers are on assembly lines where the air is cooled and constantly circulated. They work 10, 12 or even more hours of hard labour until they are exhausted. Unable to maintain the prescribed minimum distance of 1.5 metres, they can neither wash their hands sufficiently nor change their facemasks.

Contract workers receive neither vacation pay nor sick pay and earn so little that they are almost forced to continue working even when they have symptoms.

These are conditions under which the coronavirus can spread like wildfire. And such settings are found not only at industry “black sheep,” but represent the norm. North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) Labour Minister Karl-Josef Laumann (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) said, “We checked the Tönnies slaughterhouse at the end of May with the occupational safety department. At that time, everything was fine at Toennies.”

With 6,800 workers and over 20 million slaughtered pigs annually, Tönnies is the largest meat processing plant in Germany and one of the largest meat producers in Europe. But it is by no means the only one facing a mass outbreak of COVID-19. For weeks, hotspots have been accumulating in slaughterhouses, where well over 1,500 workers have been infected with the Sars-CoV-2 virus since the end of March.

So far, at least 265 workers at Westfleisch in Coesfeld, 40 in Oer-Erkenschwick and 34 at Boeser Frischfleisch in Schöppingen (Borken) have fallen ill. At Vion in Schleswig-Holstein, at least 110 workers were infected and 412 at Müller-Fleisch in Baden-Wuerttemberg. In other countries, too, and especially in the United States, the pandemic has struck devastatingly among slaughterhouse workers, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has reported several times.

On Wednesday evening, the district of Gütersloh extended testing to all workers at Tönnies. District Administrator Sven-Georg Adenauer, a grandson of Germany’s first post-war Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, asked the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) for administrative assistance with coronavirus testing. The district also ordered the closure of production at Tönnies and, at the same time, had all schools and day-care centres closed again until the summer holidays. These had only ended the lockdown two days earlier, on June 15. Dozens of parents and children protested against the closure in front of the meat factory on Thursday afternoon.

Corporate managers and politicians as well as many journalists are now trying to blame the workers themselves for the recent outbreak. When asked what the outbreak at Tönnies says about the loosening of the pandemic measures, Armin Laschet (CDU), Minister-President of North Rhine-Westphalia, replied, “That says nothing about it at all, because Romanians and Bulgarians entered the country and that is where the virus comes from. That will happen everywhere.”

Gereon Schulze-Althoff, head of the Tönnies pandemic crisis team, also tried to explain the outbreak by the fact that many Eastern European workers went home to their families on the long Corpus Christi weekend. This “probably led to a source of infection in

our company,” said the Tönnies’ spokesman. District Administrator Adenauer followed suit, claiming that the company was “professionally positioned” and that “probably other workers from outside had joined us.”

This is a transparent attempt to take the company out of the line of fire. It follows the playbook of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) by seeking to divert the anger of the population against Romanian, Bulgarian and Polish workers.

However, this attempt failed after only a few hours when a prominent scientist refuted the claims based on an objective analysis. Isabella Eckerle, head of research in the department of infectious diseases at the University of Geneva, explained that a weekend visit could by no means explain such a large number of new infections in such a short time. The incubation period takes much longer, she said. The mass outbreak pointed to an “unnoticed superspreading event” in the meat factory that has been going on for some time. “In close contact, and under unfavourable working and living conditions, a single person or only a few people infected initially can lead to a very high number of secondary infections,” explained Eckerle.

On Thursday, several media outlets quoted Freddy Adjan, deputy federal chairman of the Gewerkschaft Nahrung-Genuss-Gaststätten (NGG, Union of Food and Beverage Workers), with the demand, “This sick system must now finally be put to an end.” The federal government must implement the already-decided ban on work contracts “without compromising the legislative process,” because the outbreaks were obviously “connected with the catastrophic working and living conditions for the mostly Eastern European contract employees,” Adjan told the Funke media group.

It is noticeable that the union leader did not say a word about how the “mostly Eastern European contract workers” could now be defended, supported, and protected. Not a word about the fact that they had to be reasonably paid and compensated for the loss of work, or that the sick among them were now entitled to the best possible treatment. Not to mention that it is necessary to mobilize German workers in their defence. Instead, Adjan exclusively addressed the government—which has known about and been responsible for the catastrophic conditions for years.

The NGG is pursuing a thoroughly nationalist policy

that carefully avoids addressing all workers. In this way, it tries to prevent a united struggle against such exploitative conditions. Neither the NGG nor any other German union has ever attempted to “represent” the many thousands of low-wage workers who slave away through subcontractors in German industry. There is a works council at Tönnies in Rheda-Wiedenbrück, but it is only responsible for about 500 permanent employees out of a total of 4,000 mainly contract workers.

The business model exploiting contract workers, with four-fifths of the employees being practically unregulated work slaves, is based on regulations and laws which the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens, together with the unions, helped to introduce 20 years ago with the “Hartz” labour and market reforms. They have all actively supported capitalist restoration in Eastern Europe and the expansion of the EU to the East. This has led to the complete impoverishment of the working class there, which has resulted in thousands being forced to accept employment via shady subcontractors for sweatshop jobs in Germany.

The former butcher’s son Clemens Tönnies can today be found on the Forbes list of the richest people in the world. A multi-billionaire, who achieved his wealth walking over dead bodies, he was helped along in no small part by the unions’ boundless willingness to collaborate as the industrial police of the capitalist system.

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