

Coronavirus spreading among agriculture and seafood workers in the US

By Emma Arceneaux
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The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic poses a serious threat to the agricultural workers throughout the United States. Reports across the country show the virus is spreading rapidly among this critical section of the working class.

About half of the 2.5 million farm workers in the US are undocumented immigrants, and a large percentage of the remainder hold temporary work visas. While farm workers are considered essential by the federal government, there have been no national mandates placed on the agricultural businesses to protect them from coronavirus, leaving it to states and individual farm owners' discretion what, if any, safety measures to take.

About a quarter of the migrant workers who travel into the US from Central America will continue traveling throughout the summer and fall, following the different crop harvests up both the east and west coasts of the country. As the virus spreads among these workers, there is a serious risk that it will be introduced into more and more communities.

Farm operations across the US have already reported widespread infections. Every single employee at one Tennessee farm, about two hundred people, have tested positive for the virus.

In Yakima County, Washington, home to the nation's largest tree fruit crop, 500 workers have fallen ill from the virus. There are nearly 1,000 cases in the Immokalee region of southern Florida, a major tomato growing region.

The workforce of the Louisiana seafood industry is made up primarily of immigrant workers, and, in May, three separate crawfish farms were found to have cluster outbreaks, with a total of over one hundred people infected.

Immigrant workers are particularly vulnerable to the

spread of the virus, above all because of their crowded living conditions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with Julie Taylor, Executive Director of the National Farm Worker Ministry about the threat of the pandemic to this particularly vulnerable section of the working class. According to Taylor, physical distancing is nearly impossible for migrant farm workers who live in dormitory, bunk-bed style housing.

Taylor explained that labor camps often consist of a series of barracks with two to three bedrooms on the bottom floor and two on the top floor. Each bedroom houses workers in two to three bunk beds. Each day workers are transported from these sparse and cramped living quarters to the farms on buses with sometimes 50 to 60 people per vehicle.

Some farms have made the effort to provide masks to workers, however, as Taylor explained, masks present their own set of problems under the difficult working conditions faced by farm workers. For example, in North Carolina, where the tobacco harvest is just beginning, temperatures have already risen above 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Within 20 minutes of working in the field, workers' masks are soaked with sweat and covered in dirt and debris. This makes them very uncomfortable.

Another major risk factor for these workers is their limited access to health care, and those who are undocumented have no health insurance at all. Those who have been provided with some form of insurance through the temporary visa program still face challenges accessing care, as they typically live in isolated, rural communities.

Taylor explained that in some cases, health care for farm workers might consist of "a migrant clinic operated by donations or volunteer hours," but it is

often challenging for the farm workers to get to the clinic for a test or treatment.

“They’re isolated at the labor camp and don’t have a car,” Tyler noted. She explained that on Sundays, a bus might take workers to the local Walmart or Dollar Tree to buy supplies. However, she added, “they’re at the mercy of the camp, so individual appointments are challenging.”

“Some clinics are trying to send small delegations to labor camps,” in response to the pandemic, “but the farm owners might discourage these. If a farm worker doesn’t have symptoms, then the grower wants them to work, doesn’t want to have to put them up in housing, pay them, and pay for their food.”

Finally, there is widespread fear of employer retaliation among farm laborers should they report an illness, try to speak out against dangerous conditions, wage theft, or even violence. This is not a new problem in the industry.

“There’s a lot of fear, among undocumented workers, of ICE raids, being detained or deported. Among visa workers or those with residency there is also fear of retaliation,” Taylor said. These workers usually reapply to the same farm year after year, so if they file grievances, they risk not being invited back.

Such is the case for two Mexican H2-B visa workers who were fired from a seafood processing plant in Louisiana, Acadia Processors LLC, after seeking medical treatment for the virus. The employer ordered them to stay quarantined in company housing while ill, without pay. The workers have filed complaints with the National Labor Relations Board and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

On top of the concern for these workers’ lives is the threat posed by a labor shortage in the industry as a whole. Many crops must be harvested within a short window of time. Without enough workers, these crops rot in the fields, creating a supply shortage, which in turn raises the retail price of produce. Increases in the price of produce will compound the threat of hunger and food insecurity faced by millions of Americans.

As the WSWS noted on June 5, due to the unprecedented economic disaster facing the working class, some 54 million Americans face hunger without the assistance of food aid, up from 37 million last year.

While the conditions faced by migrant farm workers are particularly egregious, they are of a piece with the

homicidal back-to-work campaign that is being carried out by the US ruling class and the ruling classes throughout the world against the entire working class.

State and local governments have lifted lock-down restrictions, and, in the naked pursuit of capitalist private profit, any pretense of slowing or stopping the spread of the coronavirus has been abandoned. The fight against the pandemic must therefore be linked with the fight against the capitalist system itself.

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