

“Four workers share each bunk bed”

More than two hundred Mexican oil workers at PEMEX have died from COVID-19

By Andrea Lobo
17 July 2020

The Mexican state-owned oil company PEMEX has reported the highest COVID-19 death toll for any company in the world. According to the latest official count, 202 active workers and 5 contractors have been killed by the virus.

Bloomberg News confirmed that only the Metropolitan Transport Authority in New York comes close with 131 deaths, while the entire US meat and poultry industry, which has four times as many workers as PEMEX, has recorded 132 deaths.

PEMEX administers its own network of hospitals for its 125,745 active employees, their families and retirees, covering a total of 750,000 people. This has led PEMEX to also report that 234 family members and 310 retirees have died from COVID-19.

As governments all over the world impose reckless “return to work” orders amid the worsening pandemic, the data from PEMEX provides damning evidence of the magnified toll that unsafe conditions at workplaces have among working-class families.

However, these numbers are still a vast undercount. The company has only tested 7,192 people, or less than 1 percent of its employees, retirees and their families. Nearly 60 percent of the tests, or 4,204, have come out positive, while more than 7,000 people diagnosed by PEMEX with respiratory symptoms were never tested.

Moreover, PEMEX medical workers are excluded from the COVID-19 data, while data nationally suggests that medical staff compose over one-fifth of all infections and deaths. PEMEX nurses were among the thousands of medical staff across Mexico and internationally who have struck to protest the lack of personal protective equipment.

At the same time, from a medical standpoint, the data provided by PEMEX is virtually useless since it does not

include the workplaces, hospitals and medical details of the COVID-19 patients.

In response to the growing outrage, the corporation claimed in its latest press release that its “integral prevention strategy against COVID-19 has successfully contained the spread of infections among workers.”

A veteran PEMEX engineer spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* from the southeastern Ciudad del Carmen, Campeche, where an outbreak among 84 workers at offshore oil rigs, including 7 deaths, was first reported on April 13 and compelled the company to begin providing daily COVID-19 reports. Far from “containing” the virus, he argued that no effective measures have been taken.

He explained: “Each shift goes up there [to the rigs] every 14 days, with hundreds of workers from across different states of the Mexican Republic. There are no health controls, and they are practically forced to go there to work even if they are vulnerable.

“They lack adequate protective equipment and four workers sleep share each bunk bed. Sometimes they do ‘hot beds,’ where one worker rests while the other one works. Most infections occur through the bunk beds. When the workers end their shift, they then return to their hometowns spreading the virus.”

Workers with chronic medical conditions have taken to social media to denounce PEMEX and the trade union, STPRM, for forcing them to work during the pandemic. “Well, if they threaten to take away your wage, how could you refuse,” one wrote.

Others on social media have protested that conditions at oil rigs, ships and storage facilities are too overcrowded. A PEMEX worker told *Índigo* recently that many truck drivers have contracted coronavirus from interacting with clients at oil stations. Another declared, “They had never

placed us under so much danger as now, and since these gentlemen arrived with their austerity, they don't care about our befallen comrades. That is what makes me angry."

The worker at Campeche confirmed to the WSWS that he knew some of the deceased workers and explained, "The widows and/or families are not getting their compensation. The union has not wanted to pay their postmortem [insurance]. They usually delay it by months, years and sometimes never pay."

Regarding the high death toll among retirees, he added, "They are vulnerable, suffer high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity. They have not received proper preventive care. Some active and retired co-workers have gotten sick and are not given care, so they seek care at their own expense in other hospitals and have died. The hospitals are saturated and have lacked medicines and medical specialists for many years."

He concluded: "The trade union leaders shine from their absence. They are locked up in their farmhouses or beach houses. They don't show their face or support their members. Meanwhile, the government is not paying any special attention to the case of PEMEX workers."

The government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known as AMLO) also sought to diffuse criticisms by holding a press conference on Wednesday with PEMEX director Octavio Romero Oropeza. He congratulated Romero for combatting *guachicoleros*—groups that steal oil—and ramping up production at refineries, but entirely ignored the reports of massive casualties from COVID-19.

Despite the drop in oil consumption and prices due to the pandemic crisis, he argued that production at PEMEX and particularly its refining capacity must be increased to have "national development" and "self-sufficiency" by depending less on foreign capital and imports.

The fact is that, "given its extremely high private debts," as explained by *El País* recently, "the Mexican oil corporation is practically operated through the permission of international credit agencies... [which allows] investors to maximize their profits."

The Mexican ruling class, moreover, only seeks to exploit the pandemic to further privatize the oil sector and funnel the proceeds from PEMEX to private investors. For this purpose, the AMLO administration and Morena party have already doubled down on austerity measures, which leave no room for providing safe conditions for workers.

During a conference in mid-April, José Friedrich,

Sub-Secretary of Development under the Morena government in the leading oil-producing state of Tabasco, told American investors, "In order to come out of the economic debacle that Mexico will certainly suffer... if we need to make agreements, alliances, contracts, partnerships with private firms to foment these investments, we must have those ready at the right time. I think it will be a very strategic issue."

AMLO's ostensible defense of Mexico's state-owned oil production has been a core item in AMLO's "left" credentials in the last decade. He claims to have left the Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD), which he led, because it was planning to support the 2012 Pact for Mexico, a set of regressive policies centered around the effective privatization of the oil industry. A surge in gasoline prices resulting from this privatization led to mass demonstrations in 2017 across Mexico, which the trade unions and AMLO's Morena party channeled behind AMLO's 2018 election.

Now, hundreds of workers and their loved ones are being sacrificed at PEMEX at the behest of the financial speculators profiting from Mexico's oil sector, as AMLO continues the cost-cutting and privatization policies of his predecessors.

Workers at PEMEX and all across Mexico can only confront the subordination of their safety and lives to the interests of Wall Street and its Mexican partners by taking the response to the pandemic in their own hands and in opposition to all the pro-capitalist and nationalist trade unions and parties, including Morena.

This means forming rank-and-file safety committees at every workplace and neighborhood to organize the necessary steps to protect their lives and those of their families. These efforts must immediately be coordinated with workers internationally, including with the rank-and-file safety committees formed by Fiat Chrysler workers in Michigan and Ohio.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>