

COVID-19 outbreak hits central Michigan flood recovery migrant workers

By Luke Galvin
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The historic flooding disaster that unfolded after the collapse of multiple dams nearly two months ago in Midland, Michigan—from which the community and neighboring areas still have not recovered—has exposed the reality of capitalism’s super-exploitation of immigrants. A recent report published by NPR detailed the cruel treatment of migrant workers employed to clean-up a part of MidMichigan Medical Center-Midland.

One hundred workers employed by a local franchise of Servpro, a disaster recovery company with operations covering the United States, were bussed to Midland in May from across the country to assist with the clean-up. When COVID-19 infections began appearing among the workers, Servpro quickly transported workers out of Michigan via van, scattering the now-infected workers amongst different worksites in other states.

Workers told NPR they were not given any personal protective equipment (PPE), no thermometers for temperature checks, and seemingly no procedure had been established to keep them safe from the virus. The workers’ temporary living quarters took the form of cramped hotel rooms, with upwards of five workers per room, living without any protection in the same tight space.

“There were cracks in the safety protocols... We would start working without masks, and then the supervisors would say, ‘We’re going to go look for masks,’ when we were already working inside,” Belliz Gonzales, an asylum seeker from Venezuela, told NPR. “We were treated worse than animals... They didn’t care about our well-being and our lives; they didn’t care that we are in the middle of a pandemic.”

At least 19 migrant workers, nearly 20 percent of the total work force, were confirmed to have caught the virus while on the job. The company hid these conditions from the MidMichigan Health medical system until the positive tests arose. During the clean-up, Servpro told MidMichigan that workers were checked daily for temperature and symptoms and that workers with symptoms or fevers were not allowed to work.

Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat, responded to the infections—spawned out of the dangerous and unregulated work environment—by claiming the workers were at fault for bringing the virus into Michigan. Servpro’s local

franchise has not been held responsible for putting these workers’ lives at risk as of this article’s writing. Neither is the company likely to incur any criminal charges or fines. Contracts and subcontracts within the recovery industry create a legal barrier protecting Servpro and other companies in the industry from liability when workers suffer injuries, similar to the construction industry.

Multiple industries, from meat processing to agriculture, utilize migrant workers as expendable sources of vulnerable labor, working them into the ground for little pay. The pandemic has exacerbated these conditions, with reports from around the country indicating that employers generally are not providing meaningful protection against COVID-19 for this section of the working class.

In effect, this has transformed the super exploitative migrant-labor oriented industries into hotbeds for exposure to COVID-19 infection. In farm work, tens of thousands of migrant workers are brought into the Midwestern agriculture regions of the United States, from Texas and Florida, in cramped vehicles from early spring through the fall every year.

In an interview with Rapid Growth Media, attorney Ben O’Hearn of the Michigan advocacy group Migrant Legal Aid stated that 49,135 migrant and seasonal farmworkers resided in Michigan in 2013 alone. This number increases to 94,167 when accounting for workers who bring their family members as well. Upon reaching a worksite, these legally vulnerable migrant workers face crowded and unsafe conditions in the fields as well as shared living, eating, and bathing quarters.

O’Hearn noted that while the geographic isolation of migrant workers in these camps lowers initial infection rates, one infection can quickly spread. He also explained that few employers have provided PPE for workers or practiced social distancing.

During the initial state lockdowns in response to the pandemic, government guidelines labeled farmworkers as essential workers, meaning the yearly movement of migrant workers continued unmitigated. Their continued movement around the country creates legal hurdles for migrant workers who need to file the proper paperwork to remain under legal working status, assuming they were already under such a status.

These legal difficulties immediately affect the ability of workers to seek out assistance due to the fear of government retaliation. Undocumented workers also do not have access to unemployment benefits and other forms of government aid. For those that do have documents, employers can label them as seasonal workers, which makes it more difficult to access unemployment benefits, according to O'Hearn.

This deeply exploitative situation facing migrant workers in Michigan is part of a national and international assault on the working class.

According to a report by Wisconsin Public Radio, migrant farmworkers only make \$15,000-\$17,000 each year under normal conditions. The Trump administration has allowed for these poverty wages to be cut even lower during the pandemic.

Their impoverished conditions have resulted in migrant workers ranking higher in rates of diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and environmental cancers. Sun and heat exposure in the fields is the leading cause of death in the industry, killing hundreds each year. Low wages, back-breaking labor, horrid living conditions, and lack of adequate medical care leaves migrant farmworkers with a life expectancy of 49 years under normal working conditions without the threat of COVID-19.

Massive outbreaks have hit migrant workers hard during the pandemic, with numerous reports outlining the risks across the US and internationally. In late June, the WSWS reported on the growing reports of infections among migrant seafood and farmworkers. The reports detailed rising cases at a Tennessee farm where all 200 workers were infected; 500 cases arose among farmworkers in Yakima County, Washington, the home of the nation's largest fruit crop. Another 1,000 cases were confirmed in the Immokalee region of southern Florida, known for its tomato harvests, and clustered outbreaks among three Louisiana crawfish farms, totaling 100 cases.

A series of reports emerged in early July detailing oppressive conditions of farmworkers in Michigan, where migrant workers in particular face infection outbreaks. Maroa Farms in Coldwater, Michigan, saw at least 57 workers infected, most of them migrant workers. Additionally, Oceana and Lapeer counties recorded 183 and 33 infections among farmworkers, respectively. The latter 33 infections were solely among migrant workers, spread across three farms.

Internationally, a range of reports has documented the spread of COVID-19 among migrant workers in the Middle East, Ireland, Canada, and countries on every continent. The spread of COVID-19 among migrant farmworkers in Canada has sparked protests among workers in Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. In Ontario alone, 1,800 cases arose among Mexican and Caribbean migrant workers due to the lacking protections against the virus. A report by *CTV News* in early June specified that of the 800 cases in Ontario, 162 originated in one farm, expressing the scale of danger related to the spread in isolated camps.

The *Irish Times* recently reported that documented cases

among migrant workers in meatpacking plants in Ireland alone is now at more than 1,050 workers. The plants involved generally lack any PPE or safety protocols for protecting workers against the virus, similar to farms in the US and Canada. The report also notes that the low paid work in the plants has resulted in many workers sharing rental units, resulting in a higher chance of infection among workers, similar to the shared agricultural camp living spaces in the US and Canada.

A recent CNBC report detailed the exploitation of migrant labor in the oil-rich fields of the United Arab Emirates, where workers reportedly have dwindling or no access to food and water and increased exposure to infection. Most workers are not getting paid for their work. Pakistani migrant workers, who make up 20 percent of the UAE's population, are being laid off in the tens of thousands.

Just like in other parts of the world, migrant workers face extremely unsanitary and crowded living conditions. The CNBC report also notes that foreign taxi drivers in Dubai did not receive pay during the country's COVID-19 lockdown. When drivers protested, their employers threatened to end their visas.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) recently published a report on the conditions facing migrant workers globally. "Migrant workers are often first to be laid-off but last to gain access to testing or treatment in line with nationals. They are often excluded from national COVID-19 policy responses, such as wage subsidies, unemployment benefits or social security and social protection measures. Where access to COVID-19 testing or medical treatment is available, they may not come forward due to fear of detention or deportation, especially those in an irregular status."

The report also notes that migrant workers currently make up 4.7 percent of the global workforce, with over 164 million workers. Travel restrictions and loss of work may have potentially catastrophic consequences for significant portions of this population, particularly with no protection. The ILO projects that "loss of income [will result] in a collapse in money sent home by migrant workers, with remittances expected to decrease by almost USD \$110bn this year."

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