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www.afgazad.com

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By Marianne Arens
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Coronavirus crisis exposes devastating conditions in the German meat processing industry

In no other industry have so many people fallen ill with the coronavirus as in the meat processing industry. Slaughterhouses in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), Baden-Württemberg and Schleswig-Holstein have been developing into veritable coronavirus hotspots for weeks now. Hundreds of workers, most of them sub-contracted from Eastern Europe, have become infected with the dangerous virus.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, 264 of 1,200 workers at Westfleisch in Coesfeld had tested positive by Tuesday afternoon, and 40 workers at another slaughterhouse of the same company in Oer-Erkenschwick are also infected. The abattoirs have been temporarily closed, and the state government has ordered the broad testing of all meat industry employees in NRW.



Factory premises of the Coesfeld meat centre of Westfleisch SCE [Source: Wikimedia]

This revealed that 34 workers were already infected at another company, Boeser Frischfleisch in Schöppingen (Borken District). At Germany's biggest meat processor, the large slaughterhouse Tönnies in Rheda-Wiedenbrück (also in NRW), the testing of a total of 7,000 employees is still ongoing.

In Schleswig-Holstein, more than 100 employees of the Vion slaughterhouse operator tested positive for COVID-19 a week ago. In Baden-Wuerttemberg, too, the number of those infected at Müller Fleisch in Birkenfeld has continued to rise. There, 412 workers, far more than one-third of the total of 1,100 employees, have now become infected with the virus.

From the Enzkreis district in Baden-Württemberg, where Birkenfeld is located, it is now reported that almost 150 employees of Müller Fleisch have recovered. However, this only means that they must resume work under tougher exploitative conditions, while the so-called "company quarantine" continues.

Despite the pandemic, most slaughterhouses are still operating, and for the staff, the pressure of work has increased once again. In Birkenfeld, those that are healthy have been working extra-long shifts of up to 12 hours on the assembly line for two weeks to compensate for the losses.

In NRW, workers from Westfleisch in Coesfeld have made it clear to broadcaster WDR that such brutal work pressure definitely prevails even in normal times. Two Romanians reported, "The contract specifies a work shift of eight hours. But normally you work 10 or 12 hours, also on Saturdays and often Sundays in addition." Others showed the camera crews where they lived: collective housing for temporary workers in Coesfeld district, where three men share a room and ten share the kitchen and washrooms.

In fact, it is precisely in such unhygienic, overcrowded, and dilapidated accommodations where the virus can spread. They are organised by subcontractors who provide the slaughterhouses with the cheap labour upon whose exploitation the meat industry's billion-dollar business is based. The subcontractors themselves also make a huge profit, as they take a large part of the wages for accommodation, placement, transport, etc. from the Eastern European migrant workers.

"We are dealing with a criminal milieu", explained Peter Adrian, who heads the research team at the *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (WAZ). "Some of these subcontractors are recruited from former rocker clubs. They can also be from drug or prostitution rings." One should "not underestimate the criminal energy". The East European workers are "squeezed

to the maximum”, they are systematically cheated of wages, working hours and labour rights.

The basic problem, Adrian added, is that “The meat industry relies on subcontractors and those they employ.” The coronavirus pandemic in the meat processing industry has at a stroke exposed a huge boil that stinks worse than rotten meat.

In fact, these conditions have been known about for years. Only now, when the coronavirus pandemic threatens to paralyze the meat industry, have they become a topic for official German politics.

On Wednesday, the German government was forced to devote a “question time” session in the Bundestag (parliament) to the topic of the meat industry. The Greens had requested the debate. Their agricultural spokesman, Friedrich Ostendorff, expressed outrage. “The primitive employment and housing situation was an imposition even before the corona crisis, now it’s becoming an epidemic hotspot.”

Absurdly enough, Hubertus Heil was also indignant about the situation. The deputy chairman of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Heil has been federal Minister of Labour and Social Affairs for over two years. It was his party and the Greens which created the conditions for low wages in the slaughterhouses with the introduction of the Hartz labour and welfare “reforms” under Gerhard Schröder.

First, Heil complained that “the lockdown must now be restored in Coesfeld”, causing “great harm to the whole of society”, and then promised to “sort out these conditions”. Society must no longer stand by and watch as people from Central and Eastern Europe are exploited, Heil said, and announced mandatory nationwide controls.

In fact, the government has long had detailed information about conditions in the meat industry. A so-called “voluntary obligation of meat companies and contractors” was agreed upon in 2015, which was renewed two years later. Nothing has changed fundamentally. In the autumn of 2019, an extensive inspection revealed serious violations of the regulations in over 85 percent of the companies.

On Wednesday, the meat industry itself announced a new round table with Minister Heil as well as Agriculture Minister Klöckner and Health Minister Spahn (both Christian Democratic Union, CDU). At the same time, the Association of the Meat Industry (VDF) rejected any criticism of working conditions. It claimed that the meat processing bosses, middlemen and subcontractors had complied with German labour law and that of the EU.

The prevailing conditions are the intended result of the EU's eastward expansion. They were deliberately sought and brought about by the same parties that are now hypocritically expressing outrage. The labour contracts, temporary working and subcontracting structures are part of the market reforms which followed capitalist restoration in Eastern Europe 30 years ago.

Between 2004 to 2009, the eastward expansion of the EU massively intensified the social crisis in the new member states there. The EU's austerity dictates turned countries like Bulgaria and Romania into the poorhouses of Europe. This benefited especially the German corporations, which in the following years succeeded in replacing standard employment relationships subject to social insurance contributions with low-wage jobs. Today's slave conditions and mafia-like structures are the logical consequence of this development.

The meat industry is only the tip of the iceberg. Similar conditions face workers in agriculture, in the cleaning industry, at parcel delivery companies, at Amazon, in the construction industry (for example large construction sites like "Stuttgart 21"), in bus companies and the entire local traffic, transport, airport ground services, etc.—and of course in the care sector and the entire health service.

It is the most oppressed sections of the working class that are most affected by the coronavirus pandemic, including suffering numerous fatalities. They bear the greatest social burden. They also bear the economic costs of the crisis in the form of short-time working, wage cuts and redundancies.

To fight against this, it is necessary for workers to break with the nationalist trade unions. They must organise themselves in independent action committees. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and its sections, the Socialist Equality Parties, are the only organisation in the world that stands up for a socialist perspective in this struggle.

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