



Irish Congress of Trade Unions

Statement to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response

Covid-19 – Clusters in Meat Processing Plants

June 2020.

1. Introduction

2. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions is the largest civil society organisation on the island of Ireland representing over 800,000 members in every sector of the economy. Congress welcomes the opportunity to make a written submission to the Special Oireachtas Committee on Covid-19 on clusters of infection in meat processing factories.
3. Congress has played a very active role in responding to the outbreak of Covid-19 in Ireland. As significant numbers of cases of Covid-19 began to emerge Government announced a range of public health measures to control the spread of the disease. The restrictions on economic activity associated with these public health measures meant that new income supports would be required to support workers and their families. Congress, through the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF) argued that these incomes supports should be sufficient to support a reasonable standard of living and importantly keep as many workers as possible in employment. As a result of this Government introduced the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme.
4. In recent weeks, as the spread of Covid-19 began to be brought under control the focus has shifted to re-starting the economy and the gradual return to normal levels of economic activity. While Congress welcomes the gradual reopening of the economy, we have been clear that it cannot be done in a way that undermines the health and safety of workers. It was this reason that Congress argued for the development of a safe return to work protocol. This protocol, which includes the requirement to have a least one worker representative in every workplace, is mandatory its provisions must be respected in every workplace.

5. The Meat Processing Sector and Covid-19

6. The meat processing sector is a very significant sector of the Irish economy and supports thousands of direct and indirect jobs. The sector was classified as essential by Government and meat processing has continued during the crisis.
7. As the numbers of Covid-19 began to increase it became clear that there was a significant number of infections associated with clusters of the disease in meat processing factories. In May 2020, there were over 850 confirmed Covid-19 cases and at least 16 clusters of within meat processing facilities.
8. There is little doubt that the processes associated with meat production made the sector vulnerable to the spread of Covid-19. Meat processing is labour intensive and is very physically demanding. Work is in the main organised around “at pace

production lines” with workers working in close proximity to one another, making social distancing difficult to achieve.

9. It is important to point out that the sector is not highly paid and because of this many workers are forced to share accommodation. This was no doubt this was a factor in the spread of Covid-19 in the sector.
10. While it could be argued that the meat processing industry was not well placed to cope with the outbreak of Covid-19, Unions in the sector raised concerns at a very early stage. In early March 2020, unions raised concerns with employers and public representatives about the potential of the spread of Covid-19 in meat processing facilities. On the 3 April 2020 SIPTU wrote to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Michael Creed) highlighting the importance of worker health and safety in the meat processing sector in advance of an EU Special Agricultural Committee. In April 2020, unions called for mandatory temperature testing at meat processing facilities. On the 28 April 2020 SIPTU wrote to the Health and Safety Authority requesting inspections at meat processing facilities. Unions in the sector also worked closely with the Migrant Rights Centre of Ireland (MRCI) in highlighting the increased vulnerability of migrant workers.
11. Throughout April 2020, SIPTU sought to engage with Government and the representatives of the meat processing industry to highlight their concerns but in the main their requests were ignored.
12. While some employers worked actively with unions in the sector to protect the health and safety of workers, others completely ignored the obvious need for enhanced health and safety measures. The slow response of Government and some statutory authorities to the concerns of unions in the sector in our view contributed to the high number of cases.
- 13. The Need for a New Approach in the Meat Processing Sector.**
14. In June 2020 we have seen a significant fall in the incidence of Covid-19 in the general population and in the meat processing sector. The development of the safe working protocol and increased activity by the Health and Safety Authority has contributed to this.
15. It is clear that Covid-19 poses a continued and real threat to the health and safety of workers generally and to workers in the meat processing sector in particular. Although progress has been made there is a need for continued vigilance. It is also clear that if the concerns raised by unions early in the crisis had been taken more seriously the high rate of infection in meat processing plants could have been prevented.

16. The lack of an active system of dialogue between stakeholders in the meat processing is an obvious weakness and needs to be addressed. A more active system of dialogue would have helped prevent the high number of cases in the sector.

17. One of the lessons from the crisis is that more collaborative approach to problem solving is essential as Ireland begins to emerge from the lock down and returns to something approaching normality. The development of a more structured system for dialogue in sectors such as meat processing is more important than ever. This would assist in developing solutions to some of the structural and underlying problems in the sector. We would urge the Committee to recommend to Government that establishment of a system of sectoral economic dialogue for the meat processing sector.

18. Congress would be happy to appear before the Committee if required to discuss this submission in greater detail.

19. ENDS.