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IRELAND REGION

Our Ref: RS/JP/LK

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FAO First Minister Arlene Foster and Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill

Dear Ministers,

I am contacting you both on behalf of Unite, the lead union representing workers in the food processing sector in Northern Ireland. Only this morning it was confirmed by Unite that a Moy Park worker, and a member of our union, working at their Dungannon site died of the condition. The situation is indeed both grave and urgent: We urgently require a comprehensive programme of mass-testing for workers in the poultry and meatpacking sectors.

Without timely action at a Ministerial level, there is every prospect that the growing number of reported clusters of Covid-19 infections being reported to us by members working in meat processing sites could potentially herald a repetition of the crisis in our care homes. There are high rates of transmission in the meat processing facilities in other countries, most notably the USA where more than 10,000 workers have contracted the virus, and Brazil where the total inadequacy of testing leaves the figure of casualties unknown. There is genuinely no room for complacency or delay.

Since the inception of this crisis, Unite has repeatedly called on employers and the HSE to ensure effective infection control measures in this sector. We are very concerned at the failure of HSENI to conduct responsive physical inspections - including at some locations where clusters have been reported. Employers tell us that they are complying with the PHA guidance but despite this, workers are still contracting this virus. It is clear that the current guidance and enforcement mechanisms are inadequate to ensure the health and safety of workers indeed they effectively make infection controls optional to employers.

Alongside a programme of mass testing, the Northern Ireland Executive must establish a sectoral taskforce to deal with workplace infection control in the poultry and meat processing sector. This must bring forward measures to address adequately risk in sites with clusters of infection – including enforced, temporary closures pending testing and a quick

turnaround of results for both workers and family members – with workers receiving full pay compensation for the duration of closure.

The HSENI must be resourced and mandated to roll out a system of physical and anonymous inspections – responsive to the trade unions who represent workers in these sites.

We ask that you act urgently on this matter. As what we seek is a cross-cutting and inter-departmental issue, we have written to yourselves as representatives of the collective Executive.

Yours sincerely

Personal Data

Jackie Pollock
Regional Secretary

