

190 Muslim workers fired from Colorado meatpacking plant

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7 January 2016

Around 190 Muslim workers at a meatpacking plant in Fort Morgan, Colorado were fired last month after walking off the job in protest of management's discriminatory decision to revoke prayer breaks during their shift.

The Colorado plant, operated by multinational food giant Cargill, employs around 2,100 hourly workers. Six hundred of these, or more than one-quarter, are Muslim refugees from Somalia, one of the world's poorest countries, which has been decimated by decades of conflict stoked by American imperialism.

The salah, or praying five times a day, is one of the main pillars of the Islamic faith. The prayers, which generally take no more than five minutes, take place at regular intervals throughout the day, which are determined by the movement of the sun across the sky. The workers involved in the walkout all worked on the plant's second shift, which falls during sundown prayers.

Management at the plant opened up a small prayer area on the premises to accommodate the workers in 2009. However, workers who have sought to utilize the space during their working hours have reported that they have been subjected to routine threats from management. "This has been going on for a long time," Jaylani Hussein of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), which is representing the fired workers in the dispute, told the press. "There have been instances last year and this year where supervisors would literally say, 'You're fired, you're going home,' if you go to pray."

Matters reportedly came to a head in December when the new manager for the second shift prohibited prayer breaks during work hours. Ten Muslim workers resigned the following day, followed shortly by a walkout by around 200 more. Cargill responded by

firing all of the roughly 190 workers who had not returned to work on December 29, citing a clause in their union contract that provides for summary dismissal after three consecutive unexcused absences.

Mike Martin, a spokesman for Cargill, denied that the company had banned prayer breaks and blamed the walkout on a "misunderstanding." He told the media the initial resignations came after the company refused a request by 11 workers to leave the production line in order to pray at the same time. Company policy, according to Martin, allows only two or three workers to leave at a time in order to keep the line moving. "While reasonable efforts are made to accommodate employees, accommodation is not guaranteed every day and is dependent on a number of factors that can, and do, change from day to day."

However, the workers say this request was never made. "They told us, 'If you try [to pray] tomorrow, you're going to get a write-up or get fired,'" plant worker Mahmoud Hassan told the local ABC affiliate.

However, even by Martin's own favorable characterization, Cargill's policy would likely be a violation of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits employers from discriminating against employees on the basis of religion. Under the law, employees' requests for a "reasonable accommodation" for their religious beliefs must be met as long as it does not place an "undue hardship" on business operations. For example, a worker can request not to be scheduled to work during the Sabbath if it goes against his religious practices.

Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, American Muslims have reported a sharp rise in workplace discrimination. One 2013 study by Carnegie Mellon University found that Muslim job applicants received callbacks for interviews at far lower rates than

Christians, especially in conservative states. The federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has also reported a sharp rise in religious-based discrimination cases reported by Muslims after 2001, doubling in 2002 and peaking at 884 in 2011. American Muslims, who comprise two percent of the population, account for nearly a quarter of all such discrimination cases.

Negotiations with the company by CAIR to have the workers re-instated have thus far led nowhere. According to company policy, workers who were terminated are not allowed to re-apply for six months; the CAIR negotiating team is reportedly attempting to have this freeze waived.

Significantly, the union that claims to represent the workers, Teamsters Local 455, has done nothing to defend the victimized workers. The local has not even acknowledged the firings on their web site or Facebook page, and has reportedly refused to talk to CAIR, to whom the workers' turned after the union's inaction. Many workers at the plant earn as little as \$14 per hour, barely above the official poverty level for a family of four.

David Macaray, a former union bureaucrat who denounced the *World Socialist Web Site* on the *Counterpunch* web site for mobilizing opposition against the betrayal by the United Auto Workers in the recent contract struggle, accused the meatpacking workers of demanding "preferential treatment" in a recent column. Evinced filthy "America-first" chauvinism, which is the stock-in-trade of the unions, Macaray asked, "Why have ICE agents chased out undocumented Latinos in these meat-packing plants and opened the door to Somalis? Why aren't more American-born men and women working these \$30,000 a year jobs?"

The mass firings in Colorado are similar to an earlier incident in Nebraska in 2008 when roughly 90 mostly Somali Muslims at a meatpacking plant operating by JBS Swift & Co. were fired after walking off the job in protest after being refused prayer breaks during Ramadan, the Islamic holy month. The United Food and Commercial Workers Union, which represented the workforce at the plant, refused to support the workers, and the local union president falsely claimed to the press that the workers had "quit."

Far from opposing xenophobic and anti-Muslim agitation, the unions function as accomplices in the

efforts by the corporate and political establishment to use the "war on terror" to divide the working class, carry out sweeping attacks on the democratic rights of all workers and justify ever-expanding wars.



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