

Police called to disperse Georgia meat processing workers who walked off the job Monday over concerns about the spread of COVID-19

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Over forty workers at the Perdue Perry Cook Plant, located in Kathleen, Georgia walked off the job Monday morning and protested outside the factory demanding sanitary working conditions, hazard pay and time off after multiple workers reported being exposed to COVID-19 at the factory. According to *Bloomberg* the factory has 600 workers who process chicken and pork products.

Local news station 13WMAZ conducted multiple telephone video interviews with workers outside the plant before several black unmarked SUVs loaded with Houston County Sheriff's deputies surrounded the workers and forced them to disperse. There are no reports of any injuries or arrests at this time.

Speaking to *CBS* reporters, Kendalyin Granville stated that several workers on the factory line have been exposed to the novel coronavirus while on the job. Perdue Agribusiness, which posted \$7.3 billion in revenue for 2019, has done nothing to clean the facility or isolate infected workers according to Granville. "Sanitize the building," she demanded. "Everybody that's been exposed to it, they need to go home. These folks are still on the floor."

Several workers stated that the company has failed to provide a safe and sterile working environment and appears to have been lying in regard to nightly maintenance and cleaning. Workers have reported food from the previous day's shift found throughout the production floor in addition to overflowing trash cans in the bathroom. While there is no evidence that COVID-19 can be transmitted through the food supply, recent studies suggest the virus can survive on metal

surfaces for 48 to 72 hours.

Over two dozen fellow workers agreed with Granville and joined her in courageously walking off the line. "You want us to go back on the floor to work? No, first sanitize the line, something, because this is not a playing matter. This is not a game," Granville told local media.

Workers' recognition of the company's indifference to low wages and dangerous conditions in the factory compelled them to take action. "We're told there's going to be more promotions and more pay for the company, but no one has seen that," fellow worker Diamond Gray stated to *CBS*. "I think a lot of people are just tired and with the virus involved. Also, I think it's just gotten to the point where enough is enough." According to *payscale.com*, the average salary for a general laborer at Perdue foods is \$12.66 an hour.

Fellow worker James Braswell pointed to the contradiction of management continuing to receive their bloated salaries working from home to avoid contracting and spreading COVID-19 while essential factory workers are compelled to risk their lives in unsanitary work spaces. "We feel like the people who they love, they're letting them work from home, but they got us in here working," he told 13WMAZ. According to Braswell, management gets to stay home during the pandemic while it's "business as usual" for production employees.

In a follow-up email statement sent to 13WMAZ following the publication of their original story, Perdue Farms advised workers "feeling ill" to make use of "up to four weeks of paid time off." Perdue reminded

“Associates” that “the federal government deemed food industry workers as mission-critical personnel. This is a huge responsibility, and we are committed to fulfilling it while keeping our Associates safe.”

Perdue Farms has been run by the Perdue family for four generations. According to Forbes, as of 2015 the Perdue family was worth an estimated \$3.2 billion. The company has faced intense criticism for its abusive practices towards laborers and livestock. In what has become an industry standard, companies such as Perdue load farmers with debt while demanding higher yearly per pound chicken yields. Chickens have been filmed in putrid conditions, wallowing in excrement unable to support the weight of their hormone infused bodies as farmers are forced to wear masks to protect themselves from the dust particles thousands of fowl generate in an enclosed environment.

The walkout of Perdue workers follows a Monday report that a Sanderson Farms slaughterhouse worker at its McComb, Mississippi plant was sent home after testing positive for COVID-19. The plant processes approximately 1.3 million birds a week, nearly 10 percent of the company’s capacity according to Sanderson’s website.

The company stated six other workers who were in close contact with the infected worker were sent home as well and that the processing station the worker utilized was sterilized. A Sanderson Farms spokesperson assured Reuters that production will continue at the facility uninterrupted. Shares of Sanders Farms shot up 5.15 percent on the news of no slowdown, reaching \$136.68 a share, the highest since February 14 of this year.

Across the United States, workers at Tyson Food, Sanderson Farms and Perdue Farms have reported an increase in forced overtime and production levels with the demand for meat soaring as bulk purchases skyrocket due to concerns in the population of possible shortages due to the pandemic and increased demand as restaurants are shuttered and millions of children remain home from closed schools in an effort to slow the spread of the virus.

It was also reported by *Bloomberg* that the US pork industry is looking to circumvent travel bans in order to request more “guest-worker” visas to restock slaughterhouses and production factories in the event of a labor shortage. While the factories have been running

at, and in some cases, above capacity in order to meet demand, there is evidence that COVID-19 has already infected a significant portion of the labor force. Capitalist interests demand that unproductive workers be excised while new laborers be lined up ready to replace them.



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