

“Show up and do your job,” Vice President Pence tells workers

Rapid spread of COVID-19 in US meat processing facilities

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11 April 2020

Reports of hundreds of COVID-19 cases at meat processing plants and a rising death toll have led to the temporary closure of a number of facilities across the US, amid mounting outrage by workers.

Three workers at the Tyson Foods plant in Camilla, Georgia have now died from COVID-19. There are 2,100 workers at the Camilla Tyson plant, which is still operating despite the deaths. Management has offered a derisory \$500 bonus to workers if they work April through June without missing a day.

Dougherty County, where the Camilla plant is located, leads the state of Georgia with 1,001 COVID-19 cases and 62 deaths. The semi-rural county, with a population of barely 90,000, has one of the highest rates of infection in the entire country, at over 7 times the national average. The outbreak at the Tyson plant is clearly a contributing factor.

Highlighting the dangers facing meatpacking workers was the death of Annie Grant, age 55, at the Camilla plant. Her children had urged her not to return to work at the plant, where she had been employed for 15 years, out of fear for her health. However, the company ordered her to return to the line even though she had reported not feeling well. She died in the hospital Thursday night after spending more than one week on a ventilator.

A worker at the plant told the *New York Times*, “How many more have to fight for their life, how many more families got to suffer before they realize we are more important than their production?”

Another said, “Our work conditions are out of control. We literally work shoulder to shoulder daily,” noting that two of her co-workers are currently fighting for their lives.

Another worker said he would stay away while the pandemic continues, “Enough is enough,” he said. “Nobody wants to risk their lives over some chicken. Sorry. My life and my son’s life are way more important.”

Many meatpacking workers earn poverty level wages and lack adequate sick time, making them fearful of missing work even if they are sick.

Despite this, the Trump administration insisted that production at meat packing facilities must continue after the deaths at the Tyson Foods Camilla plant were reported. “Show up and do your job. You are vital,” Vice President Mike Pence declared this week. He added hypocritically: “You are giving a great service to the people of the United States of America and we need you to continue, as a part of what we call critical infrastructure, to show up and do your job.”

But the US government is doing nothing to ensure safe conditions for “critical infrastructure” workers. Instead, the single-minded focus of the political establishment has been protecting the fortunes of the super rich through \$6 trillion in corporate handouts, not protecting workers or battling the pandemic.

The situation at the Camilla, Georgia plant is being increasingly replicated at meat processing facilities across the country.

The Cargill Meat Solutions plant in Hazleton, Pennsylvania shut down temporarily on Tuesday after reports that 130 workers at the 900-worker facility had tested positive for COVID-19 and large numbers had called in sick. The operation supplies supermarkets in Pennsylvania and surrounding states.

A total of four meat-processing plants in Pennsylvania have now shut down temporarily. In

addition to the Hazleton plant, they are JBS Beef in Souderton, CTI Foods in King of Prussia and Empire Kosher Poultry in Mifflintown, in central Pennsylvania.

JBS closed its plant in Souderton after “several senior management team members” displayed flu-like symptoms. It plans to reopen the plant next Thursday, April 16.

Production continues at the giant JBS meat processing plant in Greeley, Colorado, despite the fact that at least 30 workers have tested positive for COVID-19. At least one worker, Saul Sanchez, age 78 and a longtime JBS employee, is confirmed dead. Hundreds of workers have protested by refusing to come to work each day, but the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) insists the lines must keep moving. The workforce is highly international, with 27 different languages spoken among the workforce.

Sanchez’s daughter Beatrice Rangel told local news media, “A lot of people loved my dad. And they said my dad should have been warned and JBS knew people had tested positive a week before my dad got sick.” She continued, “They didn’t do anything to protect him. If they would have protected him or gotten him out, I don’t think my dad would be where he is now,”

Smithfield Foods is closing its plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota through Monday after reports became public that 80 workers at the facility had tested positive for COVID-19. In justifying its determination to resume production with the least interruption, Smithfield management draped itself in the flag, emphasizing its patriotic duty to sustain the nation’s food supply.

Meanwhile, the UFCW at the plant said the real number of coronavirus cases was likely 120. Despite this, the union praised management’s actions. “We applaud Smithfield’s decision to temporarily close the plant to push for an even safer work environment...”

In every case the role of the unions in the meatpacking industry has been to suppress worker opposition and ensure production continues without interruption. The UFCW, the Retail Wholesale and Department Store union and others seek to diffuse worker anger through endless rounds of talks. At the end they hail minor cosmetic changes in procedures by management, claiming workers are safe.

The outbreak at the plant makes the Sioux Falls

facility one of the “hotspots” for COVID-19 infections, accounting for one fifth of all cases in the state. Plant management and Sioux Falls Mayor Paul TenHaken held a conversation Thursday over the outbreak, which the mayor described as “tense.” TenHaken said that he was concerned that the outbreak in the plant would spread to the community, especially among Hispanic and Nepali immigrants who make up a significant portion of the Smithfield workforce.

Local Latino advocates staged a protest at the plant Thursday evening over the treatment of employees, driving their cars around the facility and waving signs. A leader of the group said the company was taking no added safety measures, “Employees are calling to tell us that they’re letting them work with a temperature of 100.3,” Nancy Reynosa, a leader of the group, told kelo.com. “They’re not taking into consideration the space between employees. They’re still gathered together.”

Meanwhile, Tyson said it is closing its plant in Columbus Junction, Iowa, for one week after 24 workers tested positive for COVID-19. The company said it was diverting livestock sent to the plant to other facilities. The Columbus Junction plant kills 10,000 hogs per day, or about 2 percent of US capacity. It employs 1,400 workers and was closed during the past week.

A worker at a Tyson plant in Wilkesboro, North Carolina plant commented, “We do not have enough distance ... they do not clean extra and do not supply face mask(s)...it’s very unsafe and it shouldn’t take for someone to get sick to send people home. I wish the government closed everything for 2 weeks. We [are] really risking our lives...my daughter [is] pregnant and she still [has] to work ... I just pray [to] God [to] cover us every time we enter the building.”



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