

“We are human, and they cannot abuse us in this way”

# Meatpacking workers demand protection as pandemic hits US food supply chain

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Food processing workers in the United States are demanding protection as the COVID-19 contagion spreads throughout slaughterhouses, meatpacking plants, warehouses, supermarkets and other segments of America’s food supply chain.

While meatpacking and grocery store workers have been deemed “essential” during the crisis, employers have refused to provide them with the most basic protections. Over the last few weeks, more than 2,000 have tested positive and scores have died, including five meatpacking workers in Colorado, Pennsylvania and Georgia and at least 41 grocery store workers, including four Kroger workers and one Meijer worker in southeast Michigan.

On Sunday, Smithfield Foods, the largest pork producer in the United States, announced it was closing its Sioux Falls, South Dakota plant “until further notice” after protests broke out over the infection of hundreds of workers at the plant. Health officials said Sunday that 293 of the 730 people who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 in the state of South Dakota work at the plant.

After scores of workers tested positive last week, the company ordered a three-day closure of the giant plant for cleaning, announcing it would add soap and hand sanitizers and install plexiglass dividers to enhance “social distancing” at the plant, which employs 3,700 workers. Company officials, however, refused to close its plant, with Smithfield president and CEO Kenneth Sullivan declaring, “We have a stark choice as a nation: we are either going to produce food or not, even in the face of COVID-19.”

While the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), the union at the plant, went along with the scheme, the temporary closure only angered workers who, fearful of retaliation by management, flooded a local immigrant advocacy group, “¿Que Pasa Sioux Falls?” with calls and text messages denouncing the unsafe conditions in the plant.

Some comments included:

“There is no soap in the bathrooms, and they put the cafeteria tables in the hallways so anyone walking by can sneeze and the particles hit those tables. I have not seen anyone disinfecting the cafeteria tables after meals.”

“The masks they gave in my department were the head nets you put over your head. They told us to put them over our face and use them as masks.”

“My department was not given any protective masks until

Thursday, April 9th but none of us can speak to the press because [we have] been warned over and over in meetings not to talk.”

“They gave us a \$500 bonus if we would not miss a day of work in the month of April. I feel this is taking advantage of people in need.”

“I was feeling sick for three days and my supervisor kept ignoring me until I tested positive for COVID-19.”

“I am very afraid now to return to work because there is no complete hygiene. I do not see anyone cleaning the tables of the breakroom. I do not see anyone disinfecting the bathrooms. There is no disinfectant where we work with the meat and we work close to each person! Please, we are human, and they cannot abuse us in this way. There are many things that this company hides but there are more than 190 sick people.”

On Saturday, the immigrant organization organized a protest outside of the plant, with scores of workers encircling the facility with their cars to demand its closure. With a potential strike looming, South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem and Sioux Falls Mayor Paul TenHaken urged the company to suspend operations for 14 days so workers could self-isolate and the plant could be disinfected.

Even before the outbreak, meat and poultry plants were notorious for fatal accidents and repetitive motion injuries due to slippery floors, speed-up and dangerous cutting equipment. This human toll will only worsen under the new Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines announced by the Trump administration last week, which allow employers to require workers who have been exposed to COVID-19 to stay on the job following exposure, provided they are asymptomatic.

Far from enforcing new pandemic-specific standards, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has left it to the discretion of employers to protect workers.

Faced with these conditions, meatpacking workers, like health care, auto industry, public transit and sanitation workers in the US and around the world, have taken matters into their own hands to protect their lives.

In addition to the group protests, many workers have simply refused to show up for work, forcing the closure of at least 10 plants in the US and Canada.

• Nearly a third of the workers—between 800 to 1,000 workers a day—have been absent at the JBS USA beef plant in Greeley,

Colorado since the end of March. At least 50 plant workers have tested positive and 30-year employee Saul Sanchez, 78, died from the disease on April 7.

- Operations at the JBS USA pork processing plant in Souderton, Pennsylvania, located in between Allentown and Philadelphia, have been halted after Enock Benjamin, a 70-year-old Haitian immigrant and union steward at the plant, died at home from COVID-19 and several managers displayed “flu-like symptoms.”

- A Cargill plant in Hazleton, eastern Pennsylvania, was temporarily closed after 164 cases were diagnosed.

- The Olymel pork plant in Quebec was shut on March 29, after 50 workers tested positive and workers made it clear, “They do not feel that the company took all the measures they could have taken to keep them safe,” according to a union spokeswoman.

- Workers at a Wayne Farms chicken processing plant in Alabama also reacted with anger after the company told them they had to pay 10 cents a day to buy masks to protect themselves from disease.

- Tyson Foods, the top US meat producer, temporarily closed plants because of outbreaks of the coronavirus, including a facility in Columbus Junction, Iowa, where more than two dozen employees tested positive, and after three workers died at one of its poultry plants in Camilla, Georgia.

According to a report in the *New York Times*, one of the Georgia workers who died was told to report to work even though she was sick: “Annie Grant, 55, had been feverish for two nights. Worried about the coronavirus outbreak, her adult children had begged her to stay home rather than return to the frigid poultry plant in Georgia where she had been on the packing line for nearly 15 years.

“But on the third day she was ill, they got a text from their mother. ‘They told me I had to come back to work,’ it said. Ms. Grant ended up returning home and died in a hospital on Thursday morning after fighting for her life on a ventilator for more than a week. Two other workers at the Tyson Foods poultry plant where she worked in Camilla, Ga., have also died in recent days.”

The UFCW has hailed an agreement with several meat processing companies, including Pilgrim’s Pride, Conagra Foods, Cargill, Hormel, JBS, Kraft Heinz, Olymel, and Maple Leaf, to provide small bonuses to 40,000 UFCW members during the outbreak, along with promises to improve working conditions and access to sick leave.

Praising the companies for “real leadership,” UFCW president Anthony Perrone falsely claimed, “These wage and benefit increases will not only protect the health and welfare of these hard-

working men and women, they will help ensure all of America’s families have the food they need to overcome the public health crisis our nation faces.”

In fact, the bonuses—many of which are tied to attendance—are designed to pressure workers to remain on the job, despite the threat to their lives. Perrone took home \$340,684 in 2019, but after decades of betrayed strikes and wage concessions by the UFCW, the average meat and poultry worker makes \$15 an hour, or less than \$30,000 a year. With a third of the workforce made up of immigrant workers, including undocumented workers, many make far less.

After being forced to close the Sioux Falls plant, Smithfield CEO Sullivan—who made \$4 million a year—declared that the closure of the plant and other meatpacking facilities put “our country perilously close to the edge in terms of our meat supply. It is impossible to keep our grocery stores stocked if our plants are not running.”

Food supply is indeed critical. But the giant food processing monopolies are not concerned about the well-being of consumers or farmers—many of whom are resorting to Great Depression-era measures of dumping milk and spoiling crops due to falling demand from restaurants and schools. On the contrary, they are driven by their profit interests and want to keep workers on the job, regardless of the threat to their lives.

In late 2018, Sullivan boasted to trade publication *National Hog Farmer* that Africa swine fever, then killing pigs throughout China and Eastern Europe, might limit supplies and lead to soaring hog prices and profits in 2019 for Smithfield, the world’s largest ham and pork producer.

Like other strikes and job actions by health care, auto industry, public transit and sanitation workers around the world, along with actions by nonunion workers at Whole Foods, Amazon and Instacart, the protests by meatpacking workers have chiefly been initiated by rank-and-file workers themselves, in opposition to the efforts by the unions to keep them on the job in unsafe workplaces.

This movement should be developed by forming rank-and-file factory and workplace committees to demand the closure of infected plants, full compensation for laid-off workers, and no return to work until these committees, working in conjunction with health care professionals, can ensure that all workers have the necessary protective equipment, testing and environment to work safely.

This must be combined with the fight for a socialist program, including the nationalization of the giant food corporations, so the provision of food, like health care and all other social rights, is based on human need, not private profit.



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