

Meatpacking plants at center of many North America COVID-19 outbreaks

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The meatpacking industry has emerged in recent weeks as a major transmission belt for COVID-19 infections in North America. Outbreaks at major processing plants in the United States and Canada have led to the temporary shutdown of a number of facilities and exposed the lack of even basic safety precautions in an industry essential for basic food production.

Recent high-profile closures include the giant JBS plant in Greeley, Colorado where at least four workers have died and the Tyson pork plant in Waterloo, Iowa where nearly 200 have tested positive. A Smithfield Foods pork plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota has a reported 800 cases.

A Cargill facility in the province of Alberta, Canada, south of Calgary, has been closed temporarily after being linked to 580 COVID-19 cases in the area including 440 plant employees. At least one worker, a Vietnamese immigrant, has died. With the plant accounting for one-third of Canadian beef production, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has warned of a possible spike in beef prices as a result of the shutdown.

According to a recent report in *USA Today* meatpacking plants are major vectors for the transmission of the virus in the United States. The paper concluded that based on its data analysis, “More than 150 of America’s largest meat processing plants operate in counties where the rate of coronavirus infection is already among the nation’s highest.” These factories account for one-third of US beef, pork and poultry production and the counties where these plants are located have infection rates higher than those of 75 percent of counties nationwide.

With the collaboration of the unions, meatpacking plants have been maintained for decades as a low wage sector beset by deplorable working conditions and the highest rates of illness of any manufacturing sector, four times the national average according to the Government Accounting Office. Federal watchdog groups indicate that

workers employed in meatpacking, including a high proportion of immigrants, some undocumented, are less likely to report illness or injury than other workers. Plants have been cited for refusing to give workers bathroom breaks even for hand washing.

COVID-19 infections had been detected at 62 meatpacking plants in the US by Thursday, according to *USA Today*, with some 3,400 workers infected. There were 17 confirmed deaths and at least 17 facilities closed. A US Department of Agriculture inspector for meatpacking plants died Thursday after being diagnosed with the virus.

Responding to the rapidly growing number of cases, Tyson Foods has closed many of its facilities. On Wednesday it suspended operations at its pork processing plant in Waterloo, Iowa, its largest such facility employing 2,800. At least one worker at the plant, Jim Orvis, age 65, has died of the disease.

In the face of the life-and-death threat posed to workers by the pandemic the response of the unions has been to maintain nearly complete silence. The union did nothing as Tyson reportedly moved hundreds of workers to the Waterloo plant from other facilities closed due to large-scale COVID-19 outbreaks with no quarantine time in between. The only action taken by United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) officials was the purchase of spray bottles of hand sanitizer for plant workers.

Iowa Republican Governor Kim Reynolds had also resisted calls for a temporary closure of the Waterloo plant, citing the potential for the disruption of food production.

The closure of the plant was achieved only after hundreds of workers at the facility stayed home from work, refusing to submit themselves to unsafe conditions. A group of Tyson Waterloo employees picketed the plant Monday morning holding signs reading “Our Families Matter” and “Shut Tyson Down.”

At other meatpacking plants, such as JBS, the UFCW has agreed to temporary pay increases or paltry bonuses in an effort to bribe workers to continue production under unsafe conditions.

In the face of the pandemic the role of US regulatory agencies has been to relax even the few health and safety regulations that are in place. In April, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) allowed 15 poultry processing plants waivers to exceed federal limits on production speed, guaranteeing an increase in injuries. It was the largest number of waivers ever granted by the USDA in a one-month period.

Despite a record number of complaints, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has done nothing to beef up its notoriously lax enforcement. Massively undermanned and underfunded, the agency typically takes six months to complete a single investigation.

Even with the closure of a number of processing plants, there doesn't appear to be a high likelihood of meat shortages. According to the *New York Times* there are 800 slaughterhouses in the US, although just 50 account for 98 percent of meat production.

Some facilities with high infection rates continue to operate, such as the JBS plant in Grand Island, Nebraska, even after 237 workers tested COVID-19 positive. The county has an overall infection rate of 7.5 per 1,000. Other plants that were closed temporarily are reopening. A Cargill plant in Pennsylvania is reopening this week along with the giant JBS plant in Greeley.

An industry expert spelled out bluntly the policy of the meat industry and the government. "The politics of this could play out that they reopen at enormous risks to workers, rather than face an actual shortage ... I wouldn't bet against that," Notre Dame professor Joshua Specht told *USA Today*.

While the food industry is an essential service, workers deserve maximum protection, including the closure of facilities that cannot be operated safely. No confidence can be placed in the corrupt government regulatory agencies that are in the pockets of the meat industry or the pro-company unions.

Workers have already taken the initiative at a number of plants by walking out and protesting to fight for their right to safety. These efforts should be expanded and consolidated by organizing a network of rank-and-file workplace committees to oversee health and safety, including control over line speed, breaks, the enforcement of social distancing and the provision of adequate

personal protective equipment.

In most cases the unions have not played any significant role in the exposure of the threat posed to meat processing workers by the pandemic. At the Plainfield Farms turkey processing plant in New Oxford, Pennsylvania, a local doctor noticed that half the people testing positive for coronavirus worked at the plant or had family members who work there. Three workers at the plant have required hospitalization and others have received treatment at emergency rooms.

A former Plainfield worker wrote on Indeed.com "The job was honestly, in all of my 45 years the worst job I have ever had, moving 20- 30,000 turkeys a day that weigh 25-80 lbs, extremely hot and humid, covered in your own sweat and turkey feces for 10+ hours a day with a ten minute break between 10:30am-5:00pm. It was like being stuck in purgatory."

The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) oversees barbaric conditions at Tyson factories in the US South. At the Tyson plant in Camilla, Georgia, three workers have died of COVID-19 infection. The plant appears to be the center of a coronavirus outbreak in the Albany, Georgia area, which leads the state in infections. As of this writing the plant was still in operation.

A Tyson beef plant in Goodlettsville, Tennessee and another Tyson poultry plant in Shelbyville are at the center of COVID-19 outbreaks in that state. The Goodlettsville facility employs about 1,600 and Shelbyville has about 1,000 workers. As of Monday, there were 79 cases at the Shelbyville plant and 120 at Goodlettsville.

Workers described lax to nonexistent safety conditions inside the plants and a union that is in the pockets of management. The Shelbyville plant is set to close this weekend for three days for cleaning. Meanwhile, the RWDSU has praised Tyson for protecting workers while keeping the plant open.



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