

Tyson poultry workers in Tennessee speak out on terrible health and safety conditions

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Two Tyson meatpacking plants in Tennessee have seen large numbers of workers infected with COVID-19. At the Tyson Shelbyville poultry plant in south-central Tennessee there have been 79 reported cases out of a workforce of 1,000. One hundred twenty cases are reported at the Goodlettsville beef plant north of Nashville that employs 1,600.

Both plants are still in operation, although the Shelbyville plant is set to close over the weekend for cleaning.

Several workers familiar with the situation at the Shelbyville plant spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about conditions at the facility and the role of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), which they described as an arm of management.

Chris, a former worker at the Shelbyville facility, said he walked out after a confirmed coronavirus case in his department. “I haven’t been back. I have three children at home. So I haven’t been back.

“Most people there work over eight hours a day and night. There are no masks to protect us. There was no being six feet apart from people.

“They cook food for the workers there and the people that cook it don’t wear masks over their faces.”

When asked about what measures the RWDSU and management were taking to protect workers, he said, “While I was there, they weren’t doing anything about it.”

Sheila, another former Tyson worker, explained, “The count of cases in Shelbyville is over 100 today ... it was 6 when I commented on [Facebook] ... 2 weeks ago. I don’t see that as them taking the corrective measures at all.”

While she had quit Tyson several months ago, Sheila still has family and friends who work there.

“Workers concerns are at the bottom of the priority list at Tyson. They have safety guidelines but enforcement is slack.

“There’s a ‘Safety Committee’ inside the plant made up of a group of employees.

“The union reps inside the plant are Tyson employees. I feel like they represent Tyson more than the Union. The Safety members are just chosen by the floor supervisors. One from each department.

“They are supposed to enforce safety rules... See it, say it. Also, report any issues like broken machines, leaks, things of that sort.”

Asked if they enforced safety, Sheila replied, “Not really actually, because they don’t see or really care about it. They’ll step over or around something that could cause injury to someone if they were to trip over it.”

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication in epub format of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site’s* coverage of this global crisis.

“I know that they started providing face masks, finally, last Wednesday. Seems a little late in the game for employee safety.

“Tyson has a very strict point system, though I have heard they’ve eased up some for now. [Employees] are expected to be there.” Sheila noted that starting pay at Tyson was \$14.70 an hour, which she described as “some of the best pay in the area” in a region noted for its notoriously exploited workforce. “But [workers] shouldn’t be made to feel like they have no choice ... and Tyson is #1 in making their employees feel like that.”

Asked if the \$500 attendance bonus being offered by Tyson was a bribe to encourage workers to report in even if sick, Sheila responded, “Exactly!!! \$500 isn’t anything over a 90-day period. That’s 90 ‘working’ days.”

She continued, “This is a personal opinion, but I feel like most processing plants are a breeding ground for the virus. It thrives on cooler temperatures. There has to be 100 percent focus on employees’ safety.”

Another worker, Jessie, said she had a family member employed at Tyson who had been sick for 10 days with a fever and had no income.

Asked about enforcement of health and safety standards at the plant, Jessie said, “They are not; they talk a big game but [I was told] there was no sanitizer, no protective gear; they were supposed to be doing temperature checks, but there were many times they stood out waiting for someone to check them, but they never came so they refused to go in until someone checked them.”

Jessie said management, with the help of the union, enforces a system of intimidation where workers are afraid to speak out: “Everyone is afraid to speak up because they will lose their jobs. It’s not right. And the sad part is if we speak up people will lose their jobs and people like us depend on it solely.”



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