

# Minnesota meatpacking plant closes after two dozen workers test positive for COVID-19

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JBS USA, one of the largest meat producing companies in the United States, announced Monday that it would be indefinitely closing its pork processing plant in Worthington, Minnesota after 33 employees and six of their relatives tested positive for COVID-19. The 2,000 workers at the plant will be laid off as a result.

Last Friday, the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 663 announced it had confirmed 19 cases of COVID-19 at the plant. But the plant remained open for two additional days for limited operations, endangering the health and safety of workers and the surrounding community.

Throughout the United States, meatpacking facilities have become epicenters for the spread of the pandemic. In South Dakota, more than 800 cases, or 40 percent of the state's current total, have been connected to a Smithfield Foods pork plant in Sioux Falls. An outbreak at a Tyson Foods plant in Dougherty County, Georgia contributed to 1,500 cases and over 100 deaths out of a population of 90,000 people, making the rural county one of the regional epicenters of the virus.

Nobles County, located in the southwestern corner of the state and the site of the JBS pork plant's operations, presently has the highest COVID-19 outbreak per capita in Minnesota state with 4.6 positive coronavirus cases per 1,000 residents in a county population of 22,000.

JBS USA Holdings is the food processing subsidiary of the Brazilian multinational JBS SA, the largest global processor of pork and beef products, which employs 78,000 employees internationally.

The JBS Worthington plant is the largest pork production facility in Minnesota and is tied for third-largest nationally among all meat processing facilities, with its workers processing 20,000 hogs per day. In

wake of the COVID-19 epidemic and corresponding closures and temporary suspensions in operations, US meat processing is down 10% nationally as of the week of the plant closure.

Like many meatpacking facilities across the United States, significant sections of the workforce is composed of immigrant and undocumented workers. This particularly oppressed section of the population is acutely vulnerable under conditions of the current pandemic.

Undocumented immigrants are much less likely to report injuries and contracted illness for fear of deportation or employer reprisal. In 2006, Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raided the Worthington plant, then owned by Swift & Company, in the largest workplace immigration raid in American history.

Many undocumented immigrants have avoided state-provided testing programs for fear of detention or deportation, according to state Health Commissioner Jan Malcom. Language barriers also play a significant role. More than 40 languages are spoken in the Worthington plant, including many first generation immigrants with limited spoken and written English skills. Because of this, the true number of infections in meatpacking facilities is undoubtedly far larger than has been reported.

With the plant closed, many of these undocumented workers lack the means to collect any unemployment or supplemental assistance due to their immigration status. But the UFCW, in the face of overwhelming opposition among workers, has negotiated only for paltry bonuses and temporary raises, effectively forcing workers to remain in unsafe conditions.

On April 10, JBS suspended operations of its meat production facility in Greeley, Colorado after 50

workers tested positive for COVID-19. Three workers later died, including a 69-year-old Hispanic man. In spite of the workforce-wide testing the company claimed it would enact over the weekend following the closure, some workers did not end up receiving tests before the Greeley facility was reopened April 24.

Even though the virus has yet to peak in Minnesota, the state is one of many which is moving towards a rapid reopening of the economy. During his daily briefing last Thursday, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz announced he would be signing an executive order to allow non-customer-facing, non-essential businesses to reopen Monday. This one full week before the governor's own stay-at-home order is set to end on May 4. Governor Walz estimated that as the result of the order, between 80,000 to 100,000 residents of the state would return to work.



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