

Trump orders meatpacking plants to remain open, as coronavirus sickens thousands of workers

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Tuesday evening, US President Donald Trump signed an executive order stipulating that meat processing plants continue operating, even as the coronavirus pandemic continues to surge through facilities throughout the industry, sickening thousands of workers. The order classifies meatpacking plants as “critical infrastructure” under the Defense Production Act, the latter historically being utilized during wartime to mandate key US industries remain operational.

The order states, “It is important that processors of beef, pork, and poultry (“meat and poultry”) in the food supply chain continue operating and fulfilling orders to ensure a continued supply of protein for Americans. However, outbreaks of COVID-19 among workers at some processing facilities have led to the reduction in some of those facilities’ production capacity. In addition, recent actions in some States have led to the complete closure of some large processing facilities.

“Such closures threaten the continued functioning of the national meat and poultry supply chain, undermining critical infrastructure during the national emergency.”

The order is squarely aimed not at securing the food supply chain or defending workers’ safety, but rather at shielding the profits of the giant food processing conglomerates and protecting them from the impact of lawsuits from sickened workers.

Following the temporary closure of meat processing facilities which have become epicenters of the pandemic, Trump cited the potential liability of the multibillion-dollar meat processing companies—which crowd workers into degrading and hazardous conditions—as the motivating factor behind the order, stating in a press conference yesterday, “They’re

having a liability that’s really unfair to them,” adding, “And I fully understand it. Not their fault.”

Tyson Foods stock price shot up over 5 percent by the end of the day in anticipation of the order.

Twenty-two US meat plants have been forced to temporarily or indefinitely close animal slaughter and processing operations since March due to large outbreaks among workers. According to the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union, 20 workers have died from COVID-19, and 6,500 workers have either contracted the virus, are showing symptoms or waiting for test results, or have stayed home following exposure.

COVID-19 hotspots have emerged at one plant after another, leading states such as Iowa to have a 75 percent increase in cases last week, the sharpest in the US. Other Great Plains states where official numbers of COVID-19 emerged slowly, including Nebraska and South Dakota, have also seen plants with hundreds of cases. Across the United States, the counties and communities where meat processing facilities are located have the resulting highest rate of infection to their corresponding populations.

Meanwhile, one Tyson executive, Steve Stouffer, complained earlier this month, “We’ve been tried and convicted already in certain spaces.”

The Trump administration worked in close collaboration with Tyson Foods and other food companies in the conception and implementation of the executive order. On April 26, Tyson Foods, the largest beef exporter in the United States and second largest processor of pork, beef, and chicken globally, released full-page ads in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. Authored by

the company's chairman of the board, John H. Tyson, the ad seeks to blackmail workers into returning to their workplace death traps by claiming mass food shortages will result if they do not, stating the US and global "food supply chain is vulnerable."

"As pork, beef, and chicken plants are forced to close, even for short periods of time, millions of pounds of meat will disappear from the supply chain. As a result, there will be a limited supply of products in our grocery stores until we are able to reopen our facilities that are currently closed".

The ad continued, "Tyson Foods has a responsibility to feed our nation and the world. The government bodies at the national, state, county, and city levels must unite in a comprehensive, productive, and thoughtful way to allow our team members to work in safety without fear. The private and public sectors must come together. As a country, this is our time to show the world what we can do when working together."

The underlying message of Tyson is this: Meat processing workers must face sickness and death at the slaughterhouses and processing facilities in order to continue generating profits for the industry executives and owners.

Trump and the meat processing executives were not alone in conspiring to force workers back into the plants. A day before signing the executive order, US Senators Joni Ernst and Chuck Grassley and Iowa state Governor Kim Reynolds urged Trump to reopen shuttered meatpacking facilities through the invocation of the Defense Protection Act.

The UFCW responded to the announcement of Trump's executive order with a predictably groveling statement. Making no pretense of opposing the order of workers back to work to epicenters of COVID-19, UFCW President Marc Perrone instead echoed the phony concern of the administration over food shortages while feigning concern for workers' safety, stating, "While we share the concern over the food supply, today's executive order to force meatpacking plants to stay open must put the safety of our country's meatpacking workers first."

The UFCW has done less than nothing to ensure the safety of its million-plus members in the food processing industries and grocery stores. Quite the contrary, on Tuesday, it yet again revealed its real function as enforcers and labor police for the

companies, working to shut down a wildcat walkout by 50 workers at a Smithfield Foods pork plant in Crete, Nebraska. The job action was provoked by management reversing itself and refusing to close the plant despite 48 cases of the virus being confirmed

According to the UFCW, temporary suspension of meat processing operations has resulted in the reduction of US reducing pork processing capacity by 25 percent and beef processing capacity by 10 percent.

The industry bosses and union officials cynically invoking the legitimate dangers of food shortages and crying crocodile tears over potential food waste and hardship for unsellable livestock coincide with the Trump Administration's intervention to force meatpacking workers back into the plants.

The responsibility for the potential disruptions to the food supply chain lie squarely at the feet of the giant food corporations, their assistants in the trade unions, and the companies' political representatives in the big-business parties. The industry's irrational, brutal and reckless operation is entirely driven by profit considerations, not the needs of the workers who produce, process, and ship all food, or society more broadly.

Meat processing workers must oppose the coordinated efforts of industry executives and the Trump administration to force them to sacrifice themselves in order to further enrich a criminal oligarchy. This requires the organization of rank-and-file factory committees, independent of the pro-company unions, in order for workers to assert that their right to safe and humane working conditions take priority, not the profit interests of the corporations.



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