

Trump orders meatpacking workers back on the job as opposition mounts to back-to-work campaign

Niles Niemuth
29 April 2020

US President Donald Trump's executive order invoking the Defense Production Act to force employees at meatpacking plants back to work marks a new stage in his administration's confrontation with the working class.

Trump has refused to compel companies to produce emergency protective equipment and testing supplies despite widespread shortages of both. But when it comes to forcing workers to toil in unsafe and unsanitary conditions, Trump is mobilizing all the powers at his disposal.

The White House is seeking to set a precedent for enforcing a return to work while absolving corporations of any legal responsibility. The order will indemnify Tyson Foods and other meatpacking companies from lawsuits from employees who say they have been forced to work in unsafe conditions.

At least 20 meat and food processing workers have died from COVID-19, and 5,000 have been infected or quarantined. On Tuesday, several dozen workers walked off the job at the Smithfield Foods pork plant in Crete, Nebraska after the company reversed course and announced it would not close for cleaning, even though 48 workers at the facility tested positive.

From Kathleen, Georgia to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, meat processing workers have protested and walked off the job to demand proper protection and sanitation. These highly exploited workforces are disproportionately composed of immigrants from Latin America and east Africa.

With the coronavirus pandemic continuing to rage, infecting over three million people and claiming the lives of at least 216,000 globally, working-class opposition to the back-to-work effort being pursued by

ruling elites, largely ignored by the media, is erupting all over the world.

The United States remains the epicenter of the pandemic, with more than one million cases and nearly 60,000 confirmed deaths. The world's richest country, with less than five percent of the global population, now accounts for one third of all cases.

A recent series of polls shows that, despite the media's promotion of small right-wing "back to work" protests, Americans overwhelmingly support stay-at-home orders and other social distancing measures. Last week, a Politico/Morning Consult poll found that 76 percent of respondents supported continuing restrictive measures for as long as necessary to curb the pandemic, even if it harmed the economy.

Garment workers in Selma, Alabama walked off the job Thursday, shutting down their plant after several workers at the facility contracted COVID-19. One worker summed up the general sentiment: "They don't care about us. They just want us to work."

On Sunday, 8,500 miles away, garment workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh took to the streets to demand two months back wages as they face starvation without any income. The global center of garment production had been shut down since March as workers refused to work in unsafe conditions.

Bangladesh continues to see a rise in the number of daily confirmed cases, and there are no indications that the pandemic is on the wane. Nonetheless, factory owners began reopening their plants this weekend, with most refusing to implement any safety measures, such as providing hand sanitizer or keeping workers apart at their workstations.

Wildcat strikes by autoworkers in Michigan, Ohio

and Ontario shut down the auto industry in March, even as the United Auto Workers was negotiating with the companies to find ways to keep the factories running during the pandemic. Joint union-company plans to reopen the plants by the beginning of May have been pushed back two weeks as workers resist returning.

Just across the US border in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, thousands of maquiladora workers who build auto parts and consumer electronic components have gone on strike and protested to demand the closure of their plants with full pay. As of last week, thirteen maquiladora workers had died in the city, accounting for nearly half of all confirmed coronavirus fatalities.

The coronavirus is now spreading rapidly in Latin America. In late March, thousands of call center workers staged wildcat strikes throughout Brazil over unsafe conditions, declaring, “We will not die in our cubicles!” The strikes, which followed calls by Italian workers for a mass strike against one of the same major transnational companies operating in Brazil, was denounced by the union that purports to represent the call center workforce.

Workers employed by food delivery App companies struck in several cities in Brazil as well as in Ecuador, Argentina and Chile beginning on April 17, demanding safer working conditions and increased pay. The actions followed a similar strike in Spain.

Nurses quit en masse Monday to protest the lack of protective personal equipment and low wages at the Kommunarka hospital in Moscow, one of the main facilities for treating coronavirus patients in the city. While nonessential businesses were closed at the end of March and confirmed cases in Russia have been surging by the thousands every day, plans are already being drawn up by government ministers for a return to work.

So far, every measure taken by world governments under the guise of combatting the pandemic has been dictated by the interests of the ruling elite. Trillions of dollars have been transferred from the working class to the banks and corporations, fueling the massive rise of stock markets. After enriching itself, the ruling class is demanding that workers get back on the job to create the surplus value and profits necessary to underwrite these subsidies for the rich.

Workers demanding safe working conditions and the closure of nonessential industries cannot rely on the

unions, which throughout the crisis have worked for the companies in an effort to keep as many workers on the job as possible and to stamp out signs of opposition.

To fight for their interests, workers must form independent rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace, independent of the unions, to organize and coordinate action with their brothers and sisters in every industry around the world to demand a scientifically and medically guided response to the pandemic.

These committees must raise the demand that there be no return to work at nonessential industries. Those workers engaged in work essential to the functioning of society must be guaranteed every protection. Full income must be guaranteed for all those workers who are laid off or furloughed for the duration of the pandemic. Workers must establish control over health and safety at their workplaces, in consultation with medical professionals, to ensure safe conditions.

Above all, this requires taking up the fight for international socialism, uniting all workers internationally across industrial, linguistic and national lines, a political perspective that is diametrically opposed to the capitalist ruling elite.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact