

Trump administration sends federal strike force to keep meatpacking plants open

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In response to a surge of COVID-19 cases in Amarillo, Texas, a federal strike force has been dispatched by the Trump administration to respond to the outbreak and make sure meatpacking plants in the area remain open.

On Saturday, Amarillo Mayor Ginger Nelson announced that the team of federal officials will arrive in the Texas Panhandle, the northern region of the state, to take over testing and investigating workers contracting the virus.

Likewise, Texas Governor Greg Abbott announced on Tuesday that the state is planning to deploy “surge response teams,” made up of health officials, emergency responders and National Guard troops which will be deployed to respond to “flare-ups” of coronavirus infections as the state moves to reopen its economy, eliminating any social distancing orders which were aimed at slowing the spread of the virus.

Currently, Potter County, which includes approximately half of Amarillo, has confirmed 818 cases of COVID-19, giving the county an infection rate around four times higher than Houston and Dallas, cities with much larger populations. Moore County, which is just north of Potter County and home to a massive JBS meatpacking plant, has an infection rate three times higher than Potter.

Texas health officials confirmed that they were investigating over 159 cases tied to a JBS meatpacking plant in Cactus, Texas. The infections are not confined to Moore County since JBS provides shuttles for the workers from Amarillo and others commute from neighboring areas including Oklahoma.

The JBS plant’s workforce is largely composed of immigrant Hispanic workers, some of whom have previously been the targets of ICE raids. The federal strike force puts these workers at a genuinely increased risk of being targeted and victimized by federal officials due to their immigration status. In conjunction with Trump’s executive order last Tuesday to force

meatpacking plants to remain operational through the pandemic, meatpacking workers are now facing the threat of deportation while being forced to work shoulder-to-shoulder in a deadly pandemic, often without protective gear.

Even prior to the deployment of the federal strike force, many immigrants working in epicenters of COVID-19 outbreaks have avoided the limited opportunities for testing or treatment out of the very real fear of detention and deportation or losing legal immigrant status for relying on public aid.

In December 2006, six JBS USA facilities were raided by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), resulting in the arrest and detention of 1,282 immigrant workers originating from South America, Africa and Asia.

In manufacturing and food processing industries, such as US meat packing where they compose a substantial section of the workforce, immigrants are less likely to report injuries and contracted illness for fear of employer reprisal. Under the present pandemic, immigrant workers are also impeded in their ability to seek out testing or have options adequately communicated to them due to language barriers.

Meatpacking plants across the US have emerged as major epicenters for the spread of coronavirus. A report published Friday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revealed that three percent of meatpacking workers at affected plants have tested positive for COVID-19. So far there have been confirmed cases at 115 meat and poultry processing plants across 19 states. There have been more than 4,900 confirmed cases and 20 deaths among meatpacking workers, the number is likely much higher as testing in the US is still limited.

Another report from the Iowa Department of Health further reveals the rapid spread of the virus in meatpacking plants. One of the largest outbreaks in the state was revealed at a Tyson meatpacking plant in Perry,

a town in central Iowa. In the plant, 730 workers tested positive, a staggering 58 percent of those who were screened.

Coronavirus outbreaks have caused meatpacking plants across the US to close or slow production. Last week, Trump issued an executive order using the Defense Production Act to deem meatpacking as vital infrastructure and cut off meatpacking workers from unemployment benefits. Together with the local and state governments, both Democratic and Republican, the Trump administration is making its priorities clear in the pandemic: meatpacking plants, although some of the most dangerous workplaces in the COVID-19 pandemic, must remain operational to maintain the profits of major meat and poultry processing companies.

Trump's executive order has served the dual purpose of shielding the meat and poultry corporations and executives from any legal liability for their workers contracting COVID-19 and becoming sick, dying, and the virus spreading in the communities and counties where meat processing operations are located.

The unions have aided in enforcing Trump's order. Specifically for JBS, the United Food and Commercial Workers union agreed to a meager \$4 an hour pay increase to entice workers to stay on the job along with a vague, nominal dedication to provide protective equipment to workers and other measures such as expanding break rooms to aid with social distancing.

The situation facing meatpacking workers reveals the real nature of the political forces in the United states. From the federal government to state and local governments, run by Republicans and Democrats, along with corporate CEOs as well as the trade unions which act as another layer of management, all are lined up to protect the profits of the rich against the needs of the working class for health and safety.



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