

Pandemic exposes inherent flaws in capitalist food production

Alex Findijs
6 May 2020

Weeks have passed since the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced plans to purchase excess food from farmers to distribute to food banks and charities to meet the growing need for food among workers and to prevent food waste. Yet, millions of pounds of food are still being destroyed or left to rot in the fields while millions of American workers are suffering from growing food insecurity as the economic impacts of the coronavirus pandemic have driven unemployment to levels not seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The New York Mission Society estimates that one-third of food banks across the country have already closed due to a lack of funding and supplies.

Devastating reports of farmers forced to cull livestock or destroy fresh food continue to emerge on a daily basis. Images of farmers destroying tomatoes, thousands of pounds of milk being dumped into drains, and piles of ripe fruits and vegetables being buried back into the soil are shocking workers around the country and the world as many struggle to put food on the table.

The scale of food waste taking place in the US

Due to inadequate reporting and tracking, no one knows for sure how much food has been wasted. However, anecdotal and piecemeal reporting gives a glimpse into the staggering level of waste.

The nation's largest dairy cooperative, Dairy Farmers of America, estimates that farmers are dumping as many as 3.7 million gallons of milk each day. The *New York Times* reported last week that a single chicken processor is smashing 750,000 eggs a week. To put this figure in perspective, the number of eggs being destroyed at this *single* factory in a *single* week amounts to the yearly average intake of eggs for 2,595 Americans.

Perhaps the most chilling reports of food waste have come from poultry and livestock farmers who have begun culling their own herds. Hog farmer Al van Beek in Iowa told Reuters that he was recently forced to abort 7,500 pig

fetuses because he did not have the room to house more animals. The decision troubled him deeply. The overcrowding is a result of lack of demand, which is in turn a result of the closure of multiple meat packing plants after thousands of workers have contracted COVID-19.

Some companies that breed piglets have even resorted to giving them away for free because demand has essentially disappeared.

Overall, the processing of hogs has fallen by a third and cattle by 10 percent compared to the usual output. Hogs are raised in cramped, temperature-controlled facilities and fed grain to hasten fattening. If they are not harvested in a timely manner, they grow too large to support themselves and can break their own legs trying to stand. Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds said she expected national pork culling to reach 700,000 hogs a week at the height of the crisis.

The financial impact of the pandemic on farmers will be devastating and for some insurmountable, if no substantial help is provided from the federal government. Hog farmers nationwide will lose an estimated \$5 billion, or \$37 per head, for the rest of the year due to pandemic disruptions, according to the industry group National Pork Producers Council.

Capitalism, food production, and the COVID-19 pandemic

The implosion of the animal product industry is a direct result of the monopolization of livestock production and the negligent government policies that support it.

Consider the following: Roughly 90 percent of all broiler chickens are produced under contract with just three large corporations, and 57 percent of hogs are owned and slaughtered by just four companies. Farmers are forced to follow the instructions of their contractors (one of these giant corporations) or risk retribution and/or even be forced to shut down. Since the decisions of these corporations are primarily directed by the need to make

profit, there are no serious considerations or motivation to implement rational solutions under the conditions of the current pandemic.

The results are devastating. Minnesota farmers Kerry and Barb Mergen had to watch as their contractor, Daybreak Foods, sent a team with carbon dioxide tanks to euthanize their 61,000 egg-laying hens. One onion farmer told the *New York Times* that he has begun burying tens of thousands of pounds of onions and leaving them to decompose in trenches because he cannot afford to distribute them without financial help.

Such needless waste is the result of system that is built around the need to guarantee profits and increase stock values. Meanwhile, the number of severely food-insecure people around the world is expected to rise to 265 million by the United Nations and 36 countries are at risk of famine.

A significant factor in this destructive system has been the development of Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs). These CAFOs are large facilities with temperature-controlled environments, making it so that pigs can be fattened quicker and production can be concentrated spatially.

CAFOs have destroyed independent producers by securing grain subsidies from the state for decades, making it possible for CAFOs to out-compete and conquer the market.

These policies resulted in higher profits for corporations but can hardly be considered a positive development in production. A study published by the Union of Concerned Scientists in 2008 details how CAFOs were only made economically viable through government intervention. It also determined that alternative methods of production would be just as productive without the additional financial and environmental costs. The study estimates that CAFOs add an additional \$5 billion in costs through externalities.

CAFOs are also notorious for causing environmental damage. Improper animal waste disposal by multiple large operations has been found to have contaminated the soil and ground water of neighboring communities.

The meat industry has become increasingly reliant upon the “just-in-time” mechanics of production. This means that animals are moved through facilities at a pace that requires the least amount of storage capacity in order to lower costs.

Under a rationally planned socialist economic system, it would be quite easy for this type of mechanics, and the science underlying it, to be implemented and utilized in a

safe, humane and environmentally prudent capacity. At the very least, every effort would be made to redirect excess meat to the hundreds of food banks across the country that are in severe need of fresh food. However, under capitalism, a system driven primarily by the need to make a profit, this powerful technology is horribly misused and underutilized.

As thousands of animals are culled, all because it is not profitable to do otherwise, millions in the US face hunger. What is required to prevent such waste is a complete restructuring of food industries to ensure that food can reach those in need while workers are protected from infection. The capitalist ruling class and state have shown themselves to be unwilling and unable to take any such action.

Much of this carnage was avoidable. Meat packaging workers could have been provided with protective equipment at the onset of the crisis. Creative and scientifically informed changes could have been made at processing centers in order to adhere to social distancing and keep workers safe. Instead, no preparations were made to prevent the waste or protect the workers. Now, the companies and the Trump administration are colluding to force meat processing workers back to work with virtually no substantial protection while the companies will be released from any legal liability for workers who get sick and die.

On top of this negligent response, the White House is considering altering minimum wage laws for workers with migrant visas. This change would result in a decline in farm worker wages by about \$2-\$5 dollars an hour. In North Carolina, for example, this change would result in an hourly wage of \$4 an hour for farm workers.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact