

“To them, we’re just numbers”

Selma, Alabama garment workers explain why they walked out of American Apparel plant

Jerry White
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On April 23, garment workers at the American Apparel plant in Selma, Alabama walked out after learning that several workers at their factory had tested positive for COVID-19. The courageous strike by the low-paid workers, who are mostly African American women, generated widespread interest, with a video posted by one of the striking workers viewed thousands of times.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, there have been several strikes and job actions in the southern US states, including walkouts by bus drivers in Birmingham, Alabama, Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Greensboro, North Carolina; sanitation workers in New Orleans and Shreveport, Louisiana and poultry and other meatpacking workers in Georgia and South Carolina. Many of these struggles have involved the most oppressed sections of the working class in rural and semi-rural areas.

American Apparel Inc. (not affiliated with the international brand) has 1,400 workers at four plants in Alabama who have been deemed “essential” because they produce uniforms and other materiel for the US military. The 234 workers at the Selma factory are currently producing 187,000 protective face masks for US troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. They have not been allowed to use those masks to protect themselves, workers at the Selma plant told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“It was dusty enough because of all the sewing, and they fired the cleaning crew before all this hit,” a worker said. The company also pays miserable wages to keep costs down for the government, which also contracts military uniforms to Federal Prison Industries, a government-run company that uses prison labor in Alabama and other states. Workers say the company uses a piece-work system with hourly wages, varying from \$9 to \$15 an hour, based on meeting production targets. “The quotas are so hard to meet,” she said, “the \$58 a day we’re getting from the company while we’re off is bigger than my take home pay.”

Describing what led up to the April 23 walkout, another worker told the WSW, “They shut everything around us, but kept American Apparel operating. One of our workers ended up in critical condition, fighting for her life. She’s recovering, but it’s day-to-day. The night before we walked out, management passed out a letter saying one worker had tested positive but had not been

in the plant for 12 days. The next morning, we found out there were at least four workers who got sick.

“I have a child with bad asthma and a compromised immune system. If I brought this home, it could kill my baby. All we were doing was trying to keep our families safe.”

“American Apparel doesn’t care about us. All they care about is the product,” she said. Referring to company CEO Chuck Lambert, she added, “The CEO said it himself: ‘We got to make money. If you don’t like the rules, there’s the door,’ he told us.

“It’s like they are sacrificing us. They tell us: ‘Either work to provide for your family, and risk your lives, or stay home and starve.’”

The workers decided to take action because the local union officials refused to do anything to oppose management. “The union works more for them than they do for us,” one worker said.

“They’re like, if management says it’s clean, you got to believe them,” another worker added. “The union doesn’t stand up for us.”

Workers know little about the American Apparel Employees Union, which appears to be affiliated either with the UNITE HERE union or the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). After initially saying the plant should remain closed for at least two weeks until thoroughly sanitized, union leaders have urged workers to return. “The local president is saying he has to go back because he has a family to feed. But how do we get respect from the company if the union doesn’t even respect us?”

While the company claims that it sanitized the plant and resumed full production, many workers have not returned because they consider the facility unsafe. “We talk amongst ourselves. We know that you can have no symptoms and still spread it. The masks they gave us are not the ones we are sewing for the military. They gave us some that were so thick you couldn’t breathe. It’s like they were trying to kill us. How do you expect us to sew when we can’t breathe?”

The concerns over safety are well founded. There have been 86 confirmed cases in Dallas County, which includes Selma. Early last week, management at the Riverdale Mill, owned by International Paper, just 16 miles to the west of the American

Apparel plant, acknowledged that several workers had tested positive. They have refused to release the total number of cases or any other details, cynically claiming that they are protecting the privacy rights of the infected workers.

On Friday, Republican Governor Kay Ivey increased the number of businesses allowed to reopen, even though Alabama saw its highest daily increase in cases, 355, last Thursday. There are now more than 9,000 cases and 369 deaths, including one at the Hyundai auto assembly plant in Montgomery, whose 3,000 workers began returning to work last week after a shutdown that began March 18.

Ivey signed two state of emergency measures, aimed at exempting employers from legal action if they infect or kill their workers. "I want to do everything within my authority to protect businesses as Alabama's economy gets up and running again," she wrote. "As we resume operations, the very last thing a business owner needs to worry about is a frivolous lawsuit from responding to COVID-19."

Like Iowa, Nebraska and other states where meatpacking workers have refused to work in slaughterhouses and packing plants where 12,000 were infected and 48 have died, the state of Alabama is threatening to cut off unemployment benefits to any worker who refuses to return to work.

On the same day as the Selma walkout the Alabama Department of Labor warned workers that they "must accept work" if they are called back or this would be considered a "refusal of work," which would disqualify them from jobless benefits. "Attempts to collect unemployment benefits after quitting without a good work-related cause can be considered fraud," Alabama Department of Labor Secretary Fitzgerald Washington said, encouraging employers to use a state website to report employees who fail to return to work over fears of infection.

More than 450,000 have filed for unemployment benefits in Alabama, with another 29,000 applicants last week.

"They're blocking me from getting my unemployment benefits," an American Apparel worker who has not gone back to work told the WWS. "They said they would keep [the plant] closed for a week and clean it. But all they did was spray some mist. And most of us have not gotten tested. I went to the public health clinic to get my test last week, but the results haven't come back yet."

Another worker reported that management is offering a \$50 bonus for perfect attendance in an effort to use economic hardship to get workers back in the plant. The company, she added, claims all the workers returned, but "they're lying to save their sales. We didn't go back, and we're not going back until May 14."

Because work was sent to another plant, those workers who have returned to the Selma plant have to stay even though there's no work to do. "Normally, after you meet your production quota you can go home. Now they're saying, 'You ain't going anywhere.'"

Selma, a city of just 20,000, has gone down in history for the famous civil rights struggles in 1965 against the apartheid system of Jim Crow segregation overseen by Alabama Governor George Wallace and enforced by local authorities and the Ku Klux Klan. Despite the passage of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Dallas County sheriff violently opposed black voter registration

drives in Selma, where only 2 percent of the city's eligible black voters (about 300 out of 15,000) had managed to register.

In response to the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a young African American demonstrator, who was shot to death by an Alabama state trooper, Martin Luther King, Jr. and others planned a protest march from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery, 54 miles away. In what was known as "Bloody Sunday," state troopers used whips, nightsticks and tear gas to attack marchers as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The scene was captured on television, galvanizing the civil rights movement and bringing thousands to Selma to complete the march to Montgomery where they were greeted by a crowd of 50,000 black and white supporters at the capitol.

"My grandma raised me and during my childhood she would talk to me about black people being killed and marchers being beaten up on the bridge. It was the things I saw in the movies and on video. But it wasn't a movie, it was her life. She taught me all about this. I think I got my courage from my grandmother.

"When we walked out, we wanted to show that we cared more about ourselves, than management and the union," the worker continued. "To them, we're just numbers.

"Trump and the government are giving out all this money. They could pay us to stay home and be safe. But they say our plant is essential because we make military uniforms. These wars are for nothing. There are young men around here being sent to Afghanistan for another 13-month tour of duty, but they only joined because there are no good jobs around here.

"After our walkout, I was contacted by workers at other American Apparel plants and a pharmacy worker at a nearby Walmart who said management told the workers if they said anything to the media about workers getting sick with COVID they would be terminated. We have to come together and stand for something. We can't say we're just going back. We have to make sure the factories are clean, and we've all been tested."



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