

US meatpacking workers continue walkouts and protests against forced return to work

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Meatpacking workers across the United States continue to take actions independent of the trade union apparatus to organize protests and strikes in the wake of President Donald Trump's April 28 executive order forcing US meat processing facilities to remain open under the Defense Protection Act. Trump's order shields meat and poultry companies and executives from any liability for the thousands of workers who have fallen and are yet to fall ill and die in unsafe working conditions.

Workers have taken actions against the horrific conditions they face in being forced to remain in or return to their workplaces that have been the center of COVID-19 outbreaks in the meat processing facilities and surrounding communities. In many cases they are being made to work without basic safety precautions and pitiful or no hazard pay bonuses.

On Wednesday May 6, at least 20 workers in West Columbia, South Carolina walked off the job at the House of Raeford Farms chicken processing plant. According to the workers, they walked off in protest of long-standing mistreatment along with the absence of any social distancing measures and the refusal of the company to grant any hazard pay wage increases during the pandemic.

A WTLX News 19 report captured video of the workers walking out of the plant shouting their grievances. Following the walkout, workers set up a picket across the street from the chicken plant. Workers who walked off acknowledged that the company would consider their employment terminated due to their labor action.

The fired and protesting chicken plant workers spoke to reporters, elaborating the reasons they undertook the walkout. Naesha Shelton, one of the workers who participated in the walkout and subsequent picket, told

WTLX reporters, "Everybody else around here is getting hazard pay. Their jobs are looking out for them." She went on, "[House of Raeford is] treating us like slaves. That's how we feel. We're being treated like slaves." Another protesting worker, Anthony Furman said in regard to the lack of safety in the plant, "This is a safety hazard. We're around each other inside this plant and we're not six feet away," adding, "We're one foot away. We're too close every day, all day."

Workers also told WTLX that they would be seeking collective legal action against House of Raeford Farms for wrongful termination and refusal to implement basic safety measures for their workers remaining in the West Columbia chicken processing plant.

Later that afternoon, workers who remained at work in the chicken plant passed on a letter to WTLX they received from plant management that was sent to them following the conclusion of the protest announcing that nonexempt workers at the chicken plant would receive an insultingly low \$1.00 an hour temporary pay increase. The letter also went on to state that the pitiful temporary raise would be reevaluated in July for whether it would be continued.

House of Raeford Farms production workers in South Carolina make an average of only \$11.51 an hour.

Already, Trump's executive order to keep meatpacking plants open has had devastating consequences. A 64-year-old meatpacking worker for chicken producer Pilgrim's Pride in Lufkin, Texas was found dead in her home Monday. Her family reported that the woman had developed symptoms on April 24 but was not tested for COVID-19 until May 4 and received her positive result a week later on Sunday, just one day before she died at home.

Fourteen meatpacking plants are reopening this week after major outbreaks, but along with the lifting of any

liability for facilitating the spread of the virus, major meat producers in the US have been encouraged by US Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue only to “consider” providing workers with COVID-19 testing. Because of this, meat producers like Smithfield, JBS, and Tyson, have prioritized reopening plants as quickly as possible and enforcing Trump’s executive order with as little protection as possible.

Perdue commended “safe reopening of critical infrastructure meatpacking facilities across the United States” in a May 8 statement published by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).

“President Trump took decisive action last week to ensure America’s meatpacking facilities reopen in a safe way to ensure America’s producers and ranchers will be able to bring their product to market,” Perdue said. “I want to thank the patriotic and heroic meatpacking facility workers who are returning to work this week so the millions of Americans who depend on them for food security can continue to do so.”

In fact, in some plants, meat producers have gone as far as refusing to test their employees. Kris Ehresmann, the infectious disease director of the Minnesota Department of Health, told the *Star Tribune* that JBS was “reluctant to test” workers when ordered by the governor of Minnesota. JBS has carried out the same policy in plants in other states, refusing systematic testing for its Worthington, Iowa pork processing plant despite many workers from the plant falling ill and testing positive for COVID-19. According to the Marshall County Board of Health, there has not been any mass testing of Worthington JBS plant employees for three weeks, but it is resuming operations.

The reopening of meatpacking plants under Trump’s executive order effectively cuts off unemployment for workers who are infected and cannot work or those who refuse to work out of concern for safety, forcing workers to choose between working in deadly conditions or starving.

Sheila, a former worker at the Tyson Foods facility in Shelbyville, Tennessee, told the WSW, “I think it’s wrong to force employees to work.” In response to the moves by legislators to shield corporations from COVID-19-related liabilities, Sheila stated, “If they are being made to work then the liability should be held in place to the employer, absolutely! Especially if there are already cases in the places they work. It seems to

me that even with PPE requirements the confirmed cases are still growing.”

On the mistreatment of essential workers, Sheila noted, “It seems that the term ‘essential workers’ actually means ‘expendable workers.’ If an employee gets hurt on the job, through no fault of their own, the company takes care of things, so I feel like they should do the same for this virus.”

“I, personally, have friends at Tyson that have contracted COVID-19. They are having to use their insurance that they pay for for medical purposes, and if they are out of work long enough, they are using their short-term disability via FMLA [Family and Medical Leave Act] to have a little income. This doesn’t help anyone who has been employed less than a year though. The company had them working so it should be up to the company to assist them in surviving!”

Jessie, whose family member is employed by Tyson, commented, “I think they’re opening up too soon, and things are just going to continue to be bad because no one [in management] is serious about the health of others.”

“I mean, when you offer employees more money to come to work sick, [you are] just asking for trouble, but they know they will come because everyone is financially suffering right now. It’s just a daily game of Russian Roulette if you ask me.”

When asked about the prospect of corporations being protected from virus-related liabilities, Jessie stated, “There is no protection for us. It’s just a hope-and-pray we don’t get sick. I guess we just pray that we stay safe because at this point there is no help, and we have no choice because we are so behind on everything.”



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