

# Meatpacking workers oppose forced return to work through protests and mass absenteeism

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Meat processing workers across the United States have defied the homicidal policy of the Trump administration, company executives and state governments to force workers back into plants that have been epicenters of illness and death from COVID-19. The actions by meatpacking workers coincide with exposure of the criminal role of the companies in refusing to shut down plants or implement critical safety measures once the pandemic began to explode across the US in March.

On June 9, meatpacking workers in Logan, Utah, marched with supporters to protest the refusal of JBS to close its beef processing plant in the city of Hyrum after 287 workers tested positive for COVID-19 ten days earlier. The workers demanded that JBS, the largest meat processing company in the US and largest producer of beef and pork globally, immediately close its Hyrum plant for deep cleaning and disinfection to prevent the further surge of COVID-19. Meat processing workers who took part in the protest also demanded that plant employees be adequately compensated during the closure or while quarantined.

The 287 COVID-positive cases were reported by the Bear River Health Department after workers at the Hyrum plant were screened for COVID-19 over the weekend of May 30. The actual number of workers who have contracted the virus is likely higher, as some workers have gone to local hospitals for testing instead of through the Bear River Health Department.

The initial protest by meatpacking workers at the Hyrum plant on June 9 took place one day before some of the 287 who initially tested positive were ordered to return to work. Cache County, where the Hyrum plant is located, experienced a one-day gain of 42 additional cases on June 8, bringing the total reported COVID-19 cases to 773. The outbreaks in the JBS plant and

surrounding area likely amount to the single largest outbreak of the virus in the state of Utah.

Another form taken in the opposition of meat processing workers to the forced unsafe return to work has been mass absenteeism, despite attendant economic hardship. Smithfield Foods reported Monday that at least one-third of its workforce in South Dakota refused to leave quarantine when ordered by the company to return to work.

The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union has entirely accepted the premise of the state/corporate forced return to work and made no attempt to oppose the push to return despite the plants becoming epicenters in the spread of the virus. The UFCW reported that between 30 to 50 percent of the more than 250,000 US meatpacking workers in the union, roughly 80 percent of all US meatpacking workers, did not report to work the week of June 8 on their own accord outside of any organized action by the union bureaucracy. The mass defiance of the return to work order demonstrates that workers have no confidence that either the companies or the government will take even the most basic safety measures to prevent the spread of illness and death. Meanwhile, the Trump administration has ordered a return to work in these deadly conditions while granting immunity to the companies and executives from any liability for the consequences.

The refusal of the unions to oppose the deadly forced return to work raises the necessity of workers taking independent action to ensure a safe workplace. This includes forming rank-and-file safety committees to enforce safe conditions, including adequate break time, slower lines speeds, full documentation of all COVID case and full pay for all workers who are sick or in quarantine.

The defiance of the return to work order has resulted in domestic meat production, measured in “daily hog slaughter capacity,” standing at around 75 percent, up from a low of 45 percent in April when more than 20 plants experienced belated temporary closure after mass outbreaks of COVID-19.

The companies have sought to offset the reduced meat production due to workers’ defiance by accelerating the production rate on animal “kill lines” through the redirection of workers who typically handle more labor- and time-intensive tasks, like deboning, to the kill lines themselves. It is not publicly known if this redirection of labor in meat production to maximize daily animal slaughter results in the undermining of safety measures. The redirection of workers from tasks like deboning and butchering results in wastage of animal parts that would otherwise be processed and a reduced availability of boneless meat.

The criminality of Trump’s executive order was further exposed in a June 12 exposé in ProPublica. The exposé details, through thousands of documents, texts and emails, the criminal and systematic refusal of management to provide infection rate data and information, which obscures the actual rates of infection, prevents subsequent contact tracing and blocks infected workers from necessary follow-up support.

As the report elaborates, when meat processing plants began experiencing surging cases of COVID-19, Tyson Foods avoided public monitoring of the infection rate by county officials by hiring a private company to oversee testing. In Wilkesboro, North Carolina, the location of a major Tyson plant, county health officials reported that the company overseeing private testing up until May provided less than 20 percent of test results to the local government, with the results provided missing basic information such as the contact information of workers who had tested positive required for necessary follow-up, contact tracing and quarantine. As the report documents, it was only after being informed by North Carolina’s public health director that the company could face prosecution unless management supplied all infection data to the state’s health department, which revealed that more than 20 percent of its Wilkesboro plant’s workers had tested positive for the virus.

The report also exposes how, while government and

meat companies had preemptive plans in place to respond to pandemics among livestock, no such plans and preventative measures were ever put in place to respond to a serious pandemic among the industry workforce. In addition to the industry’s corporate executives systematically sabotaging the ability of health officials to receive, determine and respond to the rate of infection in the plants, no federal, state or local governing body or agency had the clear power or authority to order the plants to either shut down or to enact corresponding safety measures to remain open.

The emails and documents obtained by ProPublica expose that, while lying in PR statements that they were taking any and all measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in their facilities, meat processing companies in fact urged public officials to ensure the plants remained open during the opening weeks of the pandemic. In one email in March authored by Smithfield Foods Chief Executive Officer Kenneth Sullivan and sent to Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts, Sullivan denounced the stay-at-home orders for causing “hysteria” and elaborated his “grave concerns” that these measures would impact company profitability.

“We are increasingly at a very high risk that food production employees and others in critical supply chain roles stop showing up for work,” Sullivan wrote. “This is a direct result of the government continually reiterating the importance of social distancing, with minimal detail surrounding this guidance.” Smithfield went on to add that “Social distancing... is a nicety that makes sense only for people with laptops,” an exposure of the lie put forward by industry executives that they are able to ensure social distancing and all other essential safety measures and precautions in their reopened plants.

As of June 12, there have been more than 24,000 cases of COVID-19 among meatpacking workers and 87 confirmed deaths, including 25 workers in Tyson plants.



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