

More than 3,300 Arkansas meatpacking workers infected with coronavirus

Cordell Gascoigne
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With the United States COVID-19 case count standing at 3.68 million cases, the meat industry in particular is being ravaged by the pandemic. Nine percent of meatpacking workers in 14 states have been diagnosed with COVID-19, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

For meatpackers in Arkansas, conditions are even worse. More than 3,300 throughout the state have been infected, according to the Arkansas Department of Health on Monday. At poultry giant Tyson, whose headquarters are located in Springdale, Arkansas, thirteen percent of the workforce has contracted the virus in northwestern Arkansas. Statewide, there were 158 poultry workers hospitalized as of last Friday, and 18 deaths. The overall total for the state is over 32,500 cases and 357 deaths.

Although the largely rural state has barely 3 million inhabitants, it has the second-largest food processing workforce in the nation, according to the most recent figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In addition to Tyson, Arkansas also hosts the world headquarters of Walmart, the world's largest grocer.

The meatpacking workforce, traditionally highly-exploited, includes a large number of immigrants in Arkansas and throughout the country. This vulnerable section of the working class has been especially hard hit. As of mid-June, nearly half the adult cases in Arkansas meatpacking facilities were among Hispanic workers in Benton and Washington counties.

Another 19 percent of adult cases were among people with Marshall Islands ancestry. Since a 1986 "Compact of Free Association" with the US government, Tyson has had a major presence in the former US colony in the central Pacific Ocean. Some 4,300 to 6,000 Marshallese currently live in Washington County, primarily in Springdale.

In northwest Arkansas, 40 percent of Hispanic cases and 28 percent of Marshallese cases were connected to poultry processing facilities.

In addition to Tyson, active cases of coronavirus have been confirmed at more than a dozen poultry facilities across the state, including George's, Pilgrim's Pride, Cargill, Butterball and Simmons.

As coronavirus cases continue to soar, a protest of two dozen meatpacking workers took place outside the Arkansas State Capitol building in Little Rock last Wednesday to demand that Republican Governor Asa Hutchinson and meatpacking companies guarantee a safe environment for workers in the midst of the pandemic. The protest was organized by local unions as well as a local group called Venceremos ("we will conquer" in Spanish).

Toney Orr, a field director for United Labor Union, said Tyson offers "incentives" to keep workers on the job, even when sick.

According to Magaly Licolli, co-founder and director of Venceremos, more than 2,300 people have signed a petition demanding the interests and well-being of the workers be adhered to. She concluded, "without government action problems in the poultry industry will continue and so will the spread of the virus."

But the appeals to corporations and the government will fall on deaf ears. Indeed, the Trump administration has intervened on behalf of the meatpacking companies, signing an executive order in April to keep the plants open. Governor Hutchinson only issued a state-wide mask mandate this past weekend, after months of steadily increasing rates of infection in Arkansas.

A ProPublica report last month detailed extensive stonewalling of public health efforts by the meatpacking companies, including even the timely and

accurate reporting of cases in the plants. One Tyson plant in North Carolina sat on its test results for over a week in May until local officials resorted to threatening management with prosecution. As of mid-June, nearly 600 workers at the plant, or one-fifth of the workforce, have been infected.

The companies are also wielding their political clout to block the implementation of basic safety measures. In March, ProPublica notes, Smithfield Foods CEO Kenneth Sullivan wrote a letter to the governor of Nebraska claiming that stay-at-home orders were causing “hysteria.” In a statement dripping with contempt for the working class, Sullivan called social distancing “a nicety that makes sense only for people with laptops.”

The meatpacking unions, such as the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), have played a critical role in beating back opposition among meatpacking workers. After a wildcat strike broke out at the JBS beef plant in Greeley, Colorado, UFCW Local 7 disavowed the action and declared that it violated the terms of the contract. The local distributed flyers among workers last week denouncing any further stoppages and demanding they stay on the job.

Instead, meatpacking workers must form their own rank-and-file safety committees to fight for a safe environment, including the closure of infected plants. This step has already been taken by autoworkers in Michigan and Ohio, in the aftermath of wildcat strikes in March and early June in defiance of the auto corporations and their agents in the United Auto Workers union.



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