

Iowa Department of Health underreported confirmed cases at meatpacking plant by more than half

Cordell Gascoigne
25 July 2020

The Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH) provided false information to the public about the number of coronavirus cases at a meatpacking plant in May. At a news conference on May 5, the IDPH reported that 221 employees at Tyson's pork processing plant in the city of Columbus Junction had tested positive for disease. In early April, an outbreak of the disease in Columbus Junction was the first of several reported in meatpacking plants across the state.

But according to records obtained by the Associated Press, this was less than half of the actual number of cases known to IDPH at the time. Only days prior to the forged May 5 declaration by the IDPH, Tyson Foods management told Iowa workplace safety regulators that 522 out of nearly 1,300 plant employees were infected with COVID-19. Furthermore, nearly a dozen workers in the plant are believed to have been hospitalized with two dead after contracting the disease.

Given that the population of Columbus Junction is only 1,855 people, this means that the equivalent of nearly one-third of the entire town had been infected with coronavirus at the plant by early-May. Meatpacking plants, which have some of the highest rates of infection of all workplaces in the country, have served as nodal points for the spread of the virus to rural areas.

The cover-up by the IDPH took place during the apex of the ruling class' back to work campaign and the continued production of the meat industry, the consequences of which have been the massive resurgence of the virus nationwide. While no officials have been directly implicated, it is clear that the real figures would have cut across this bipartisan campaign.

Taking a pro-industry approach, Republican Gov.

Kim Reynolds declared her intent to "manage" the outbreaks in Iowa. Reynolds worked with Tyson executives to continue production, despite the rapidly growing number of cases and death. Tyson Foods President Dean Banks said, "We plan to increase production at Columbus Junction gradually, with the safety of our team members top of mind."

In a press conference on April 20, less than two weeks before the false IDPH figures were released, Reynolds said that she had no plans to use her emergency powers to temporarily close plants. Noting that Iowa produces nearly one-third of the nation's pork supply, she proclaimed that the state's most important objective was "keeping that food supply chain moving."

In a public statement, she applauded President Donald Trump's order to keep such plants open throughout the country. "We will continue to see clusters of positive cases [in the plants]," Reynolds said, "but these are also essential businesses and an essential workforce. Without them, people's lives and our food supply will be impacted. So, we must do our part to keep them open in a safe and responsible way."

She then turned over the podium to the health department's deputy director, Sarah Reisetter, who said the Tyson plants in Columbus Junction, Perry, Waterloo and two other workplaces had confirmed outbreaks. Reisetter said the Waterloo plant had 444 positive cases, but county officials said days later it actually had more than 1,000.

After the cover-up at Columbus Junction was exposed, IDPH spokeswoman Amy McCoy claimed that the lesser figure of 221 was all that it "could verify from our data systems" at the time.

McCoy continued, “Keep in mind, we had just established an outbreak definition, and wanted to share the information we had available. Since that initial round of testing back in April, the testing reporting process has significantly improved.”

In fact, IDPH never updated the number of confirmed infections in the city of Columbus Junction. The department does not report updates of workplace outbreaks on the state’s coronavirus website as they do for long-term care facilities.

At the May 5 briefing, Reisetter said that the 221 cases reflected 26 percent of those tested, which would be 850 total tests.

Tyson Foods spokesman Gary Mickelson said, “Coordinating facility-wide testing and obtaining results is a complex process that takes time,” and that the number of infections announced by the state “appeared to reflect only the first round of testing at the plant,” further claiming that additional testing had uncovered hundreds more cases.

According to an Iowa Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) inspection report, Tyson Foods officials said they learned of the first case in Columbus Junction on April 1, only forcing the idling of the plant on April 5, after 29 workers tested positive for coronavirus.

Reynolds had reportedly sent 1,100 testing kits to the county during a two-week shutdown in the aftermath of production being halted. On April 20 the pork-processing plant reopened with “new safety measures.” Spokesman Mickelson then stated that the company “is not aware of any current infections” (at the Columbus Junction processing plant).

Only after two workers at the same plant died after contracting COVID-19 did Iowa OSHA open an inquiry, inspecting the plant ten days later on April 30. Iowa OSHA visited the plant and met with Tyson management. The Iowa OSHA report stated, “There were 522 positive COVID-19 cases to the best of the company’s knowledge.”

In an effort to shift blame for the inhuman practices from Tyson Foods onto the shoulders of the health department, the Columbus Junction plant manager stated that communication between the company and public health officials was “not efficient.” The report also stated that information about the positive cases was not available for days after testing.

Iowa OSHA did not cite the Tyson Foods plant for any workplace safety violations even after the two deaths, claiming the company “was trying to follow the best CDC guidance at the given time.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact