

Wisconsin immigrant meat packing workers fired in retaliation for protesting over unsafe working conditions

Rafael Azul
14 August 2020

Thirty-one immigrant workers were fired in late July at a Strauss Brands meatpacking plant in Franklin, Wisconsin after taking part in a protest demanding better health and safety conditions. Officially, at least six workers are confirmed to have contracted the disease in the plant, but the real number may well be higher.

While Strauss is a minor player among gigantic meatpacking companies such as Tyson Foods, Smithfield and JBS, workers both immigrant and non-immigrant face brutal conditions inside its plants.

Meatpacking plants are centers for the spread of COVID-19 in the United States and around the world. However, information about the extent of the spread in meatpacking plants is sporadic and incomplete due to stonewalling by the meatpacking companies, often with the collusion of local health authorities. But according to data compiled from local news sources by The Fern, at least 40,000 meatpacking workers in the US have contracted the virus and 189 workers have died.

Last month it was discovered that Iowa health officials had under-counted the number of cases at a Tyson plant by more than half. Earlier this week, Carolina Public Press published emails from county health officials who successfully lobbied against the regular public disclosure of coronavirus cases in the state's meatpacking plants, describing it as "very detrimental to any cooperative relationships that we have with the plants."

The catastrophic situation in the meatpacking plants, which were already among the most unsafe workplaces in America, has produced growing opposition among meatpacking workers, often in opposition to unions such as the United Food and Commercial Workers who

have collaborated with the companies to keep workers on the job. The most significant of these was a wildcat walkout by hundreds of workers last month, which was opposed by the UFCW, at the JBS beef processing plant in Greeley, Colorado.

Most of the fired 31 protesting workers in Franklin, who had worked for Strauss for 12 to 20 years, were fired without warning on the basis of alleged irregularities with their Social Security numbers. After employing the workers for years, management suddenly informed the targeted workers that they were not authorized to work in the US.

In firing the workers, the company acted against the recommendations of the IRS authorities that mandate that workers not be fired because of this, rather they are to be granted "sufficient time" (usually 120 days) to fix the problem.

Denny Alvarado, one of the fired workers, said the company never told him about any discrepancy with his Social Security number until the day he was fired, though he had been working at Strauss for 17 years.

The victimized workers had supported a request by Voces de la Frontera, an immigration advocacy group, for the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to investigate conditions at the plant. After the firing, the group, which is aligned with the Democratic Party and the unions, urged the company to rehire the fired workers. When Strauss management refused, this group urged the fired workers to accept a small monetary settlement.

On August 7, 100 protesters, including some of the fired meatpacking workers, picketed the plant, concluding with a rally and press conference, involving Racine and Milwaukee Democrats and officials from

the teacher and transit unions.

In addition to Alvarado, María Ramirez, who worked for 13 years at the plant and is a mother of four, also spoke. María said she suffered foot and shoulder injuries at work and had tested positive for COVID-19 in late April, falling sick for more than a month. Upon her return, when she told her co-workers that they had been exposed she found out that nobody had been informed about her illness. María was fired on July 23.

She told the audience that management had increased their initial compensation offer to the fired workers from a single day's pay to four days' pay per year worked. María said she had not decided whether to take this pitiful offer and was still pursuing a worker's compensation case against the company.

There is no reliable information for how many Strauss workers have been infected with the coronavirus. Elizabeth Goodsitt, spokeswoman for the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, declined to say how many Strauss workers had tested positive.

Other officials dubiously claim it is hard to determine whether Strauss workers that tested positive were infected at the plant or elsewhere. Strauss Brands also refuses to release the information.

Currently, Voces de la Frontera is circulating a 5-point petition directed to Strauss, which includes the demands for rehiring the 31 fired workers, firing the plant's HR director, fair compensation for workers who choose not to return, implementing CDC and OSHA-recommended safety measures and extending health insurance coverage by six months for fired workers.

With its breakneck line speed and physically demanding, highly repetitive labor, the meatpacking industry was among the most dangerous in the US even before the pandemic. According to a 2019 report by Human Rights Watch:

Among the tens of thousands of companies that reported severe injuries to OSHA, several meat and poultry slaughtering and processing companies ranked among the highest reporters: Tyson Foods is fifth, Pilgrim's Pride is thirteenth, Cargill Meat Solutions is sixteenth, and JBS USA is seventeenth ...

These meat and poultry companies have significantly smaller workforces than many

other employers at the top of this list. Tyson Foods, for example, is behind the US Postal Service, UPS, and Walmart, each of which employs more workers in the United States than all production workers in the animal slaughtering and processing industry combined and more than three times Tyson's entire workforce, on the low end.[65] Together, poultry slaughtering and processing companies reported more severe injuries to OSHA than many industries that are popularly recognized as hazardous, like sawmills, industrial building construction, and oil and gas well drilling.

The conditions in the meatpacking industry are the product of a historic decline in living standards imposed, beginning in the 1980s, with the collusion of the UFCW and other unions, who were transformed over the course of many years into little more than cheap labor contractors. In the early 1980s, meatpacking workers still earned wages higher than the average for US manufacturing workers. As of 2019, they are 44 percent lower than the average, according to Human Rights Watch.

This process was universal and affected every section of the working class, including air traffic controllers, autoworkers, teamsters and others. However, one of the major episodes took place in the meatpacking industry, when the UFCW intervened to shut down a strike by Hormel workers in 1985-1986, bringing scab workers into the union and removing the leadership of the local.

This shows that the road forward for meatpacking workers is to break from the unions and form rank-and-file safety committees in every plant as a first step in linking the struggle of all workers against the deadly policies of the ruling class in response to the pandemic.



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