

OSHA fines meatpacking industry \$30,000 after 203 COVID-19 deaths and 18,000 infections

Cordell Gascoigne
18 September 2020

The US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) last week issued its first two COVID-19-related citations against the meatpacking industry, after more than six months of inaction, during which time 18,000 workers were infected and at least 203 died. In a measure of how much the political establishment values workers' lives, the fines against JBS and Smithfield Foods totaled less than \$30,000, or less than \$2,500 per worker who died at the two plants that received citations.

OSHA fined JBS, the world's largest beef and pork producer, \$15,615 for failing to protect workers at its Greeley, Colorado, plant where six plant floor workers and one office employee died and another 290 were infected. The company was cited for violating the "general duty clause" requiring it to provide a safe workplace. The agency also charged JBS with failing to provide a log of injuries and illnesses in a timely manner, after an OSHA inspection in May.

Fifteen thousand dollars "doesn't even cover one funeral," said Rosario Hernandez, the wife of Alfredo Hernandez, a janitor at the plant who was sickened by the virus and still uses a breathing machine.

The Brazilian-based multinational, which had a revenue of \$52 billion last year and made \$629 million in the second quarter alone, denounced the OSHA fine as "immoral and unethical." In a statement, JBS claimed the Greeley plant has only recorded 14 new cases in the past three-and-a-half months, with no positive cases in nearly seven weeks, although the state's health department has recorded a far higher number of cases.

OSHA also fined Smithfield Foods \$13,494 for violations at its Sioux Falls, South Dakota, plant, where

at least 1,294 workers were infected and four died. The company, which had \$14 billion in revenue last year, issued a statement saying, "This OSHA citation is wholly without merit and we plan to contest it."

In April, Smithfield workers at the Sioux Falls plant organized a series of protests against unsafe conditions, forcing its temporary closure. JBS workers in Greeley organized protests in April and in July. This was part of a wave of job actions and protests by meatpacking workers that were largely organized in defiance of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), which was keeping workers in the infected slaughterhouses and processing plants.

On April 28, President Trump used the Korean War-era Defense Production Act to order the reopening of the meatpacking plants and characterize the workforce as "essential workers." According to emails obtained by ProPublica, just a week before the order was issued, the meat industry's trade group essentially drafted the wording for Trump.

"The draft that Julie Anna Potts, the president of the North American Meat Institute, sent to top officials at the U.S. Department of Agriculture was written using the framework of an official executive order and stressed the importance of the food supply chain and how outbreaks had reduced production—themes later addressed in the president's order," ProPublica reported earlier this week.

"By keeping meat and poultry producers operating, the President's executive order will help avert hardship for agricultural producers and keep safe, affordable food on the tables of American families," Potts said the day after the order was issued. "The safety of the heroic men and women working in the meat and poultry

industry is the first priority. And as it is assured, facilities should be allowed to re-open. We are grateful to the President for acting to protect our nation's food supply chain.”

The only thing being protected, however, were the profits of the giant meatpacking companies.

In July 29, OSHA forged an alliance with the North American Meat Institute (NAMI) under the pretense of guaranteeing that there was enough Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and safety protocols in place to maintain production in the plants. The federal agency, OSHA said, “recognizes the value of establishing a collaborative relationship to foster safety and health practices and programs to improve American workplaces.”

OSHA has repeatedly revised guidelines on behalf of the meatpacking and other industries. Although the federal agency has received more than 8,000 COVID-related complaints from workers—ranging from the deliberate concealing of outbreaks, the lack of PPE and social distancing and retaliation against whistleblowers—OSHA has issued in the area of 10 citations, including the two against JBS and Smithfield.

This underscores the need for meatpacking workers to form rank-and-file safety committees to undertake the functions long ago abandoned by the corporatist unions like the UFCW. This includes monitoring and enforcing safe working conditions, opposing efforts by the companies, state agencies and the unions to conceal outbreaks, and upholding the right of workers to collectively refuse to work under unsafe conditions. These committees should strive to unite meatpacking workers with teachers, autoworkers, college students and all those opposing the sacrifice of human lives for corporate profit.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact