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Whistleblowers: Colorado meatpacking plant used threats and lies to keep potentially infected workers on the job

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Are you a meatpacking worker laboring in unsafe conditions? Contact the World Socialist Web Site to get your story out there and for help organizing a rank-and-file safety committee at your workplace.

Two former health screeners at the JBS beef processing facility in Greeley, Colorado after a coronavirus outbreak have blown the whistle on flagrant violations of basic safety measures by management.

Nearly 300 out of a workforce of 6,000 at the plant are confirmed to have contracted the virus. Six are dead. More than 5,000 cases and 100 deaths have been confirmed in Weld County, where the plant is located, including two deaths since the beginning of October. The outbreak at the plant garnered nationwide media attention, and the plant was forced to close for several days in April after being declared a coronavirus hotspot by local health officials. At around the same time, Saul Sanchez, 78, became the first of six JBS employees to succumb to the disease.

The plant has also been a center of opposition to the continuation of work in the meatpacking industry. In July, workers carried out a wildcat strike in opposition to the United Food and Commercial Workers union, which has demanded that workers remain on the job.

“It’s just horrible, terrible,” a worker told local news station Denver7 in June. “There is no social distancing in [the plant]. [There are] so many employees elbow to elbow. It’s not happening with dividers up.”

Responding to the employee’s concerns, the station

sent a camera crew to capture the long and crowded line of employees reporting for work outside the plant during shift change. However, when security guards spotted the camera crew, the guard began separating workers.

The two whistleblowers are Sarah-Jean Buck and Erica Villegas, who were hired in as temporary workers earlier in the year to screen plant workers as they entered the gates. Affidavits written by them explain that JBS management provided them with faulty screening equipment. The company’s temperature gun would register the same temperature for multiple employees in a row and provide unrealistic figures.

According to Buck, her gun registered one employee’s temperature at 84.7 degrees. “I told management there is absolutely no way that is accurate because nobody is going to be 84.7.” She said that low-temperature readings occurred regularly during her shifts at JBS. “I would say to [head of safety at JBS, Donald Shrine] something to the effect of, ‘This is not working. It is reading the same temperature for the past 10 people.’ He would respond something to the effect of, ‘Oh, you’re on a streak. It’s fine.’”

JBS also pushed to get visibly sick employees to stay at work inside the plant. “First, we were told to threaten them with no pay,” Buck said, adding that management intimidated her into clearing employees who had symptoms. She had also raised concerns about other obstacles she believed would negatively impact her ability to properly screen the more than 3,000

employees that report to work daily. “They said we were short staffed, and we need to start letting people go in,” she said.

Buck, a licensed medical assistant who was hired as a temporary worker to conduct coronavirus screenings at the plant beginning May 10, alleged that JBS was negligent despite the rise in case numbers. Just after two months, she quit her job when management told her that she should have cleared an employee that she had sent home for exhibiting symptoms consistent with the deadly disease. “I got chewed out for sending a girl home that was coughing so bad she couldn’t even talk.

“JBS would try to convince people they were fine to go to work,” Buck said in her affidavit. “For example, if someone came through screening and reported having a cough, [JBS’s health office supervisor Cecilia Borrego] would ask if they slept with the window open. If the employee said yes, then Cecilia would say that was causing the cough, and they were fine to go to work.

“I wanted to make changes, but it just got worse,” Buck said. “If they don’t figure out what’s really going on there, people are going to continue to die.”

In spite of management’s actions that led to hundreds of infections and deaths of six workers, it has only received a wrist slap of a fine of \$15,615 by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). OSHA had also cited the company for violating the “general duty clause” requiring it to provide a safe workplace. After an OSHA inspection in May, the agency also charged JBS with failing to provide a log of injuries and illnesses in a timely manner.

Erica Villegas said she received little to no training for her role as a screener and noted that JBS did nothing to accommodate non-English speakers during the screening process. Although Villegas is bilingual in English and Spanish (and she states in her affidavit that she was the only screener who was), many other languages are spoken among the plant’s largely immigrant workforce, which also includes a large contingent of workers from Somalia. She said that Somali and other languages were not accounted for in the screening process. According to Buck, “All we had was paperwork in English. I would say about 50 percent of the people speak English. So they are the only ones getting screened.”

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complaints, JBS USA’s Nikki Richardson unwittingly acknowledged the company’s negligence when she “boasted” that management had tested 400 workers over the month of September, or barely more than five percent of the workforce. The company has also refused to answer repeated inquiries from Denver7 and instead issued a statement declaring the whistleblowers as “disgruntled former workers.”

The meatpacking industry, among the most unsafe under “normal” conditions, has been one of the hardest hit by the pandemic. More than 45,000 meatpacking workers across the United States have tested positive for coronavirus, according to investigative reporting site The Fern. However, given the lack of systematic reporting, this figure, which was culled from local media reports and press releases, is almost certainly a vast undercount. Meatpacking plants have functioned as centers for the spread of the disease, particularly into more remote and rural areas of the country.

In contrast to many other industries which were at least temporarily shut down in the spring, meatpacking plants have, with few exceptions, remained open during virtually the entire pandemic. The industry’s operations are backed by the Trump administration, which issued an executive order in April to keep meatpacking plants open and is undermining what little federal safety enforcement exists. They are also supported by state governments, which have worked hand in glove with the industry to limit the public’s knowledge of the spread of the disease in the plants.



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