

Automation drive accelerates in meatpacking industry in response to coronavirus pandemic

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The spread of coronavirus throughout the meatpacking industry, where tens of thousands of workers have been infected in the United States alone, is greatly accelerating plans by major meatpacking companies to introduce automation and robotics into the plants.

Nationwide, at least 48,000 meatpacking workers have been infected and 245 have died, according to The Fern. The major meatpacking companies are framing their investments in automation as a humane response to outbreaks in their workforces. However, the same companies, with the support of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and other unions, have forced workers to remain on the line throughout the pandemic and have worked to cover up the true extent of the infections. Management at JBS' beef plant in Greeley, Colorado were revealed by two whistleblowers to have deliberately allowed potentially infected workers into the plant and threatened health care screeners who sent symptomatic workers home to quarantine. Even before the pandemic, the meatpacking industry was among the most unsafe, with massive rates of carpal tunnel and other repetitive motion injuries.

Instead, the coronavirus is being seized upon to implement an "Amazonization" of the workforce, using advances in robotics, in the manner pioneered by the online retail giant, to greatly intensify the exploitation of an already low-wage workforce. No doubt a crucial aim is to "thin out" the ranks of increasingly restive meatpacking workers, who have carried out wildcat strikes and protests at several facilities in opposition to the companies' "herd immunity" policies.

Tyson Foods, the poultry titan of the meat industry, has rapidly increased its investments in automation. Over the past three years, Tyson Foods has invested

over \$500 million, including the founding in August 2019 of the Tyson Manufacturing Automation Center (TMAC) in Springdale, Arkansas, near its headquarters.

TMAC has been focused on developing automation and robotics for the company production line in order to help improve efficiency. This summer, they tested a robot to perform such tasks as moving chicken breasts from a conveyor belt into tray packs for sale in grocery stores. TMAC's main focus is the development of an automated deboning system for poultry. The efforts to create and implement "robot butchers" is being sped up, according to Tyson Chief Executive Noel White.

Like Tyson Foods, Canada's Lesters Foods was forced to close many of its meat-processing facilities early on in the pandemic. Lesters Foods' president, Henry Mizrahi, sought automation as an alternative to maintain production. Lesters Foods has invested millions in a five-year plan to increase automation, including an initial plan to install robotic arms in one of its facilities capable of moving packages into larger containers for shipping, to reduce the rate at which workers remain in close proximity to one another.

Mizrahi, capitalizing upon the pandemic's displacement of workers, is certain automation is "worth the expense," adding, "When we started to see [COVID-19 affect other plants], I saw how tragic the impact was on human health. The pandemic has certainly accelerated our strategy of planning for more robotic equipment."

Automation, Mizrahi says, will allow "increase food security and improve plant safety." But in reality, workers are being replaced, not protected. The drive for automation no doubt has the potential to free workers from laborious and life-threatening tasks, particularly during a pandemic, but the result of automation under capitalism is to increase the exploitation of workers

through layoffs, speedup and wage cuts.

Meat plants account for \$1 billion in global annual sales of automation supplies and services. Georgia-based Cantrell-Gainco, which sells chicken deboning equipment manufactured in Japan's Mayekawa plant, has fielded double the usual number of inquiries since the coronavirus pandemic hit North America.

Mayekawa, which has manufacturing plants in Brazil, Europe, India, Mexico, Serbia, South Korea, and the United States, issued a statement on global sales stating its chicken deboning robot parts sales are set to rise by more than \$28 million from \$32 million in 2019 to \$45 million this year and \$60 million in 2021. This includes North American sales regarding affecting Tyson Foods, Sanderson Farms, and Peco Foods.

In Brazil, the country's fourth-largest pork processor, Frimesa, has intensified its automation efforts as COVID-19 sweeps the nation, spending R\$20 million, or \$3.53 million USD, annually. Claudecir dos Santos, Frimesa's research manager, said that the automation will receive a 5 percent annual increase in funding. Frimesa's Assis Chateaubriand plant under construction in the state of Parana will include five robots, costing approximately €500,000, or \$586,000, each.

Olymel LP, one of Canada's largest pork and poultry processors, had a plan for automation before the pandemic forced the company to temporarily close its Yamachiche plant for more than two weeks in late March, after 9 out of the more than 1,000 workers tested positive for the disease. Upon the facility's reopening, the company decided to accelerate the plan, which entails the use of robots to sort meat cuts, pick and pack shipments, and stack crates.

Pilgrim's Pride, a multi-national food company mostly owned by JBS SA, is currently one of the largest poultry producers in the United States and Puerto Rico, and the second-largest chicken producer in Mexico. After exiting bankruptcy in December 2009, it moved its US headquarters to Greeley, Colorado in 2011. The company said in July it will use automation to double capacity of a Minnesota plant to produce chicken sold in tray packs.

It is worth recalling that over the summer a grand jury in Denver, Colorado indicted Jayson Penn, the president and CEO of Pilgrim's Pride, along with a former executive at the Colorado-based chicken

supplier, for price-fixing. Two executives, Mikell Fries and Scott Brady, from a Claxton Poultry Farms located in the state of Georgia, were also indicted.

Chief commercial officer Henrik Andersen of Denmark's automation manufacturer Frontmatec said, "The outbreaks of [COVID-19] will put extra spice into the need for automation because the fewer people you have, the less likely you are to suffer from these outbreaks."

In 2018, the global meat sector was valued at \$945.7 billion. It is forecast to increase to \$1,142.9 billion by 2023. Production of meat worldwide saw an increase between 2016 and 2018, from 317.2 million metric tons to around 330.5 million metric tons. The world is projected to produce 60.8 million metric tons of beef in 2020, down 922K metric tons from 2019 due to the coronavirus pandemic.



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