

The gruesome outcome of “herd immunity”

Managers at Tyson pork plant took bets on how many workers would contract COVID-19

Tom Hall
19 November 2020

The plant manager at Tyson’s largest US pork plant ran a betting pool with supervisors and managers to wager how many employees would become infected with coronavirus, according to a recent lawsuit. So far, over 1,000 workers in the Waterloo, Iowa plant have been infected and five have died. Management also deliberately lied to the public about the extent of the infection and ordered workers with symptoms to remain on the job.

While appalling, the situation at the Waterloo facility is far from unique. Nationwide, at least 50,000 meatpacking workers have been infected since the start of the pandemic and at least 253 have died, according to the Food & Environment Reporting Network. Tyson Foods, the world’s second-largest meat processing company, leads the industry with more than 11,000 confirmed infections and 35 deaths. Major outbreaks also occurred at Tyson’s pork plant in Perry, Iowa, where more than 60 percent of the workforce tested positive, and two plants in Columbus Junction and Camilla, Georgia, where together six workers died.

The callous indifference to human life of the management at this particular plant is the direct outcome of the policy of “herd immunity” pursued by the entire corporate elite, sacrificing human life by keeping production going as the pandemic rages. Tyson’s fourth quarter earnings report blew past analysts’ expectations, nearly doubling its net income to \$692 million and reporting increased sales volume for pork, chicken and prepared foods.

While falsely claiming that any pause in production would threaten the American public with starvation, in reality Tyson is ramping up pork production to take advantage of falling output from Asian and German competitors, according to the *Motley Fool*, which declared the company was living “High Off the Hog.” The company’s pork and beef sales jumped by 15 and 11 percent respectively, and Tyson reportedly increased exports to China sevenfold in the first quarter.

The lawsuit, filed by Isidro Fernandez, accuses top Tyson

executives of responsibility for the death of his father Oscar Fernandez. The complaint argues that top management was fully aware of the danger of the virus and how it was spreading throughout the plant and other facilities nationwide but lied to the public and to workers, claiming that no infections had occurred at all.

Plant manager Tom Hart and other managers not only neglected elementary safety measures, according to the complaint, but explicitly directed supervisors to ignore symptoms and to force workers to remain on the job even when they were known to be positive. Manager John Casey reportedly referred to the coronavirus as a “glorified flu” and told workers not to worry because “everyone is going to get it.” Meanwhile, top managers “started avoiding the plant floor because they were afraid of contracting the virus,” delegating their responsibilities to low-level supervisors.

Management may have been directly responsible for introducing COVID-19 into the plant, the legal complaint contends. Tyson transferred workers from its Columbus Junction and Camilla plants after the two facilities were temporarily shut down due to major outbreaks and sent them to the Waterloo facility without any testing or health screenings. Contractors and other third parties were also allowed to enter the plant without health screenings.

In one case cited by the complaint, a worker was allowed to finish his shift after vomiting while on the floor. Workers were not even provided with elementary personal protective equipment, such as surgical masks.

In a single night, April 12, nearly two dozen workers were sent to the emergency room, according to the complaint. However, only four days later, “Tyson company officials publicly denied a COVID-19 outbreak at the Waterloo Facility.” Working conditions at the plant were so bad, with workers packed shoulder-to-shoulder in unsanitary conditions, that the local sheriff declared he was “[shaken] to the core” after visiting the plant.

The plant finally shut production temporarily beginning

April 20, according to the complaint, due to “a lack of healthy labor.”

In addition to direct threats, Tyson and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) agreed to the payment of \$500 “thank you bonuses” to workers who did not miss a shift for three consecutive months. Exploiting the economic hardship of workers, the bonuses were used as an incentive for workers to stay on the job even if they were sick.

The filing describes conditions resembling a modern-day version of *The Jungle*, the classic muckraking novel about the early 20th century Chicago meatpacking industry by Upton Sinclair, which depicted exhausted workers falling to their deaths into vats where they were ground up into lard. However, there is one crucial difference: while the publication of that novel led to the Meat Inspection Act and workplace safety legislation, federal, state and local government authorities have been involved from the beginning in the conspiracy with Tyson to cover up infections and immunize the giant corporation from prosecution.

In April, after coming under pressure from county officials, Tyson’s CEO Noel White met with Iowa’s Republican Governor Kim Reynolds to secure an executive order stating that only the state government, and not local authorities, had the authority to close businesses. On April 28, President Trump issued an executive order under the Defense Production Act keeping meatpacking plants open during the pandemic. The Iowa Occupational Health and Safety Administration (IOSHA) also suppressed workers’ complaints against Tyson at both Waterloo and Perry.

In a public statement yesterday, Tyson effectively acknowledged the truth of the allegations by suspending Hart and other supervisors without pay. The company announced an internal investigation, headed by former President Obama’s attorney general, Eric Holder. The choice of Holder, a wealthy attorney for Wall Street before and after his stint in federal government, is a clear signal that the “investigation” will be a whitewash.

During his time as US Attorney General, Holder shielded the major banks from criminal prosecution in the aftermath of the 2008-2009 financial crash. He also spearheaded major assaults on civil liberties, siding with the police in every civil rights case in federal courts and playing a key role in the military-style occupations of Boston in 2013 and Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore in 2014. He is also the author of the “Holder Doctrine,” the position that it is legal for the president to assassinate US citizens without trial.

An earlier company statement, issued Wednesday, denied the allegations and cited the praise the company received from Waterloo Mayor Quentin Hart, county officials and UFCW Local 431 President Bob Waters during a tour of the

facility in early May. “Tyson has gone above and beyond to keep their employees safe and I support the reopening of the facility,” Waters is quoted as saying. “This pork plant and all of the measures they’ve put in place are an example of how to effectively set up a safe work environment for the employees,” the UFCW bureaucrat declared.

In Greeley, Colorado, JBS workers walked out in July after six workers had died in the plant and UFCW Local 7 instructed workers to remain on the job. Yesterday, the union local issued a flyer instructing workers to social distance from their families and loved ones on Thanksgiving, even as the UFCW allows workers to be crammed together inside of infected slaughterhouses and meat-processing plants.

If Biden takes office in January, his policies will be essentially no different than Trump. Following a video conference with five Democratic and five Republican governors on Thursday, Biden declared, “I am not going to shut down the economy, period” and repeated twice, “No national shutdown.” These statements came just days after Biden met with top corporate executives and union officials, including UFCW International President Marc Perrone, to recruit the unions to his campaign to “get the economy back on track” in the midst of the greatest health catastrophe in generations.

With the death toll surpassing the 250,000 mark earlier this week, it is more apparent than ever that it is up to the working class to take action to halt the spread of the deadly disease. This means organizing rank-and-file safety committees independently of the pro-corporate trade unions to expose the truth about the spread of the disease in meatpacking plants, assert workers’ control over line speed and health and safety, and reach out to the broadest sections of the working class to wage a common fight to save lives.

Walkouts and a general strike must be prepared to shut down nonessential production and demand that the billions in corporate profits and trillions the US Congress handed to Wall Street be redirected to guarantee full income to workers and small businesses affected by the shutdown. At the same time, massive resources must be allocated to provide full protective equipment, regular testing, free medical treatment and the safest working environment possible for essential workers.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact