

Arkansas poultry workers protest lack of protection against COVID-19

James Langley
17 December 2020

On December 8, dozens of workers at George's Inc. poultry processing plant in Springdale, Arkansas walked out, shutting down two essential processing lines and halting the operations of the facility. Workers voiced concerns over unsafe working conditions, the lack of safety measures and sanitation, and management's efforts to conceal COVID-19 outbreaks at the plant.

The walkout at the plant, which is not unionized, was the first of its kind by poultry workers in Arkansas, a state dominated economically and politically by the meat processing giant Tyson Foods. The Tyson, Cargill and George's poultry plants in the northwestern corner of the state have been a hotbed for the spread of COVID-19, with at least seven workers dying at Tyson Foods chicken plant in Van Buren, about 60 miles south of Springdale.

George's Inc. is the ninth largest poultry producer within the United States, with facilities in Virginia, Missouri, Tennessee and Arkansas, employing over 4,800 workers. As of December 8, the net worth of the President of George's, Carl George, stood at \$55.5 million.

In contrast to this immense fortune, workers at the Springdale plant, many of whom are immigrants from the Marshall Islands and Latin America, earn poverty level wages of \$12 an hour—about \$24,960 per year before taxes—and work under the most oppressive conditions. Last month the Food and Environment Reporting Network (FERN) reported over 290 COVID-19 cases at the Springdale plant. This was before the current surge of infections nationally and updated official numbers are hard to come by due to the absence of reporting by management and the state.

In fact, the George's plant in Springdale is not listed on the Arkansas Department of Health's most recent report on COVID-19 outbreaks in poultry plants. The same FERN report from November listed over 641 George's workers who tested positive for COVID 19 in other facilities in Arkansas and Missouri, while the number of

cases in the company's plants in Tennessee and Virginia were unknown due to those states' lack of reporting.

According to workers who spoke to reporters from the publication *Facing South*, the walkout was sparked by the management's decision to end the previously mandated staggered shift times, designed to reduce the numbers of workers coming in contact with each other during shift changes. Since the company ended the program, workers have been forced into narrow hallways as they arrive and depart from work, making social distancing impossible.

"In the afternoon shift, [social distancing is] much worse because there are significantly more people. That hallway is far too small for all of us to fit in it," Juana, a worker who debones chicken at the plant, told *Facing South*. She asked reporters to be identified by a pseudonym because she and other protesting workers are worried about retaliation.

Workers have also charged the company with failing to report new positive cases in the plant and not paying workers who have had to quarantine or take time off to wait on the arrival of test results.

Magaly Licolli, the cofounder of Venceremos, a local Springdale organization who helped organize the walkout, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the conditions facing workers at George's and other local poultry plants.

"There is a lot of starvation going on, because a lot of workers who are the main providers for their families are getting infected with COVID and cannot work and have to quarantine. Some workers were so damaged by the virus that they were in the hospital for over three months. Many of them have million-dollar medical bills.

"There is one worker who works for Tyson who has only 55 percent lung capacity, so he cannot go back to work because he cannot tolerate the temperatures. He is very fragile because of the infection. For months, he hasn't received any paycheck and the company isn't providing him anything, so he is about to lose his house. I

have been organizing for over five years and poultry workers have been facing horrible conditions forever, but this year has just been unbelievable. The lack of care and the lack of interest in providing workers with the most basic protections on the part of management is unbelievable. Organizing poultry workers has been really hard, but with this pandemic it's been about fighting or dying. There is no other option.

She continued, "Workers are being retaliated against too. There is a single mom who was fired for going to the bathroom without permission. Even though she was asking constantly for a break, her request was denied so she had to run, otherwise she would have to pee on herself as other workers have done. So, they fired her. She was a single mom in this pandemic."

Most of the workers who walked out were on the debone line, where they use knives, scissors and other tools to remove the bones from chicken at a breakneck pace, which has only increased since the beginning of the pandemic, *Facing South* reported. The shutdown of the two critical lines led to a virtual halt of production throughout the plant.

The increase of line speed since the beginning of the pandemic is due to a new program created by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), where select processing plants may be issued line speed waivers to increase the speed of production. George's facility in Springdale received a waiver in April, increasing line speed to 175 birds per minute, which was 25 percent faster than the previous 140 birds per minute. Increasing speed on the processing line means placing workers at a higher risk of infection, as they are required to stand closer together.

There is a high correlation between processing plants who have received line speed waivers and the spread of the virus in the industry. This was acknowledged by the CDC, which in April "recommended" to Smithfield Foods, the nation's largest pork packer, that "changes in production practices (e.g., line speed reductions) may be necessary in order to maintain appropriate distancing among employees."

The increased speed also places workers at a higher risk of occupational injuries, such as cuts, neck and back pain. Despite such advice, line speed still continues to be an issue across the industry as shown by George's processing plant.

After the walkout, George's management retaliated by threatening to fire the striking workers, telling them they needed to go back to work or go home. Supervisors told

workers they would address their concerns "one-on-one." But workers were unmoved and yelled, "We won't leave until you meet our demands!" *Facing South* reported.

The next day, management agreed to reinstate the staggered shifts program temporarily, though workers have expressed skepticism over how long this concession may last. All other demands, including for greater transparency in reporting COVID cases by management, more thorough safety precautions and sanitation measures, and higher wages have not been addressed by the company.

The pandemic has been particularly brutal for the 15,000 Marshallese in Northwest Arkansas who came to the US under a Compact of Free Association signed after 67 nuclear test bombs dropped by the US in the mid-20th century contaminated their native Pacific islands with radioactive pollution, according to an article in *Facing South*. More than half of working-age Marshallese in Arkansas work in poultry plants, the publication noted, with many also living in multigenerational households where they can transmit the disease to elderly relatives who are not eligible for Medicare in Arkansas, leaving many with health insurance.

A total of 48 Northwest Arkansas residents who were Marshallese or Pacific Islander have died of the virus, accounting for about 12 percent of the region's deaths, the *Northwest Arkansas Democrat Gazette* reported earlier this month.

Across the United States there have been over 65,611 COVID-19 cases within the meatpacking industry and over 308 workers who have died, according to FERN on December 16. As the WSWS reported in late November, recent studies have shown that there is a close correlation between outbreaks at meat packing plants and the broader spread of the virus within surrounding communities, with the industry being linked to more than 8 percent of coronavirus cases in the opening phase of the pandemic.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact