

Nebraska governor says undocumented meatpacking workers will not receive vaccine

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Nebraska's Republican Governor Peter Ricketts has announced that the state government will "prioritize citizens and legal residents ahead of illegal immigrants" in the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, according to Taylor Gage, the governor's communications director.

The revelation of Nebraska's decision to divide vaccine administration by citizenship status came after Ricketts was questioned during a press conference on Monday on whether undocumented workers in the state's meatpacking plants would receive the vaccine.

Ricketts responded by saying, "You're supposed to be a legal resident of the country to be able to be working in those plants. So, I do not expect that illegal immigrants will be part of the vaccine with that program."

Pressed further by reporters, Ricketts said, "If you're working in the plants, you're supposed to be here legally. So, to get the vaccination, you got to be working here legally to be able to be part of the food processing program."

According to the Associated Press, undocumented immigrants make up about 14 percent of the meatpacking workforce in South Dakota and Nebraska. About 66 percent of meatpacking plant workers in Nebraska are immigrants. The employers, with the tacit support of state authorities, exploit undocumented workers and use periodic immigration raids to terrorize these workers in order to suppress opposition to slave labor wages and conditions.

The result of Ricketts' racist and anti-immigrant remarks will be to further intimidate undocumented workers who will fear that they might face deportation if they seek to inoculate themselves and their families from the deadly disease.

This will mean more deaths in the meatpacking industry, which has already claimed the lives of at least 232 workers, including 22 in Nebraska. According to the Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting, more than

44,500 coronavirus cases have been linked to meat processing plants around the US and 5,200 meatpacking workers have been infected in Nebraska.

Of course, the coronavirus does not recognize nationalities. A recent university study found that outbreaks at meatpacking plants were responsible for nearly 8 percent of all COVID-19 cases in the United States during the early months of the pandemic.

Charles Taylor of Columbia University and Christopher Boulos and Douglas Almond of the University of Chicago found that between 236,000 and 310,000 coronavirus cases through July 21 occurred in the "proximity of a meatpacking plant," comprising 6 percent to 8 percent of infections at the time. Between 4,300 and 5,200 coronavirus deaths were in counties near large meat processing facilities, representing about 3-4 percent of all US deaths. "The vast majority" of the cases recorded, the researchers conclude, were "likely related to community spread outside these plants."

These are not the first xenophobic rants from Ricketts or other governors in states dominated by Tyson Foods, JBS, Smithfield and other food processing giants. Ricketts, the son of TD Ameritrade founder Joe Ricketts and a member of the family that owns the Chicago Cubs baseball team and has a net worth of \$4.5 billion, previously blamed outbreaks on immigrant families who "have multiple generations of people living together, or a lot of people living in a household."

These remarks were echoed by South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem who claimed the infection of more than 1,000 workers at a Smithfield pork plant in Sioux Falls was not due to workers being forced to work shoulder-to-shoulder in the plants but cultural issues among immigrant workers. "Ninety-nine percent of what's going on today wasn't happening inside the facility," she told Fox News. The virus happened "more at home, where these employees were going home and spreading some of

the virus because a lot of these folks who work at this plant live in the community, the same building, sometimes in the same apartment.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that food processing and agriculture workers be prioritized for vaccination right after health care workers in the same category as people over 75 and other essential workers.

Nebraska is the first state to suggest that it would deny the vaccine to undocumented workers. In the same week that Trump incited his fascistic supporters to seize the US capitol, a Republican governor is trying to enforce a program of racist triage, in which certain populations are denied the care they deserve due to their citizenship status.

Predictably, the United Food and Commercial Workers union issued no public statements to defend undocumented meatpacking workers. The UFCW has been complicit in keeping workers inside the infected factories, going so far as to sign deals including no-absentee bonuses, which encourage economically desperate workers to stay on the job even if they are sick.

All meatpacking workers, black, white and immigrant, must reject the efforts to divide the working class and demand that the vaccine is provided to all workers, regardless of immigration status. In every facility, workers should organize rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the UFCW and other unions, to monitor safety conditions and take collective action to shut down unsafe facilities and demand adequate PPE. These committees must break the conspiracy of silence over outbreaks and demand the release of all information about infections. Meat processing workers should contact the WSWS to report on conditions in their workplace and organize the fight for rank-and-file safety committees.



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