

UFCW complicity exposed in outbreak at Tyson pork plant where managers bet on infections

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Are you a meatpacking worker? Contact the World Socialist Web Site for information on organizing a rank-and-file safety committee at your workplace.

Since the beginning of the pandemic in March, more than 50,000 workers in the US meatpacking industry have tested positive for COVID-19 and over 250 workers have died. Though the entire industry has been a hotbed for COVID-19 infections, the situation at Tyson Food's plant in Waterloo, Iowa has been especially alarming, with more than 1031 of the 2800 workers at the plant testing positive for COVID-19, while 6 have died.

The plant became infamous throughout the country after a lawsuit revealed that management had placed bets on how many workers would become infected while publicly denying the existence of any cases in the facility. While the lawsuit specifically named Board chair John H Tyson and then-CEO Noel White as defendants, a whitewash internal investigation commissioned by Tyson, and carried by former Attorney General Eric Holder, found only seven local plant officials responsible.

One worker who spoke to the *Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier*, described the conditions in the plant: "It's unsafe every day. It's a scary moment coming here," he said. "But I got bills to pay, so it's like—you have a choice, but it's either be without a job or get sick."

The worker, who is 45 years old, said that conditions at the plant were similar, if not worse to that of being in the prison: "I came straight from the prison system to here. Coming from the prison system, dealing with COVID inside of prison, to coming out here to a plant that has a high percentage of COVID—it's scary because I got children, and I'm like taking my chances. I got to pay bills."

The worker was told by Tyson management to "not be afraid of the virus" and to not get tested. The worker

interviewed by the *Courier* said he knew three co-workers who got sick and never returned to work.

From the beginning, Tyson has received critical assistance from the United Food and Commercial Workers union in maintaining production in spite of mass infections and deaths. UFCW Local 431 even collaborated with management last spring to implement a \$500 perfect attendance bonus, as hundreds of workers were becoming infected.

This mirrors the role of the trade unions in every industry, including the United Auto Workers, the American Federation of Teachers and others, which have worked hand-in-glove with management to suppress workers' opposition and enforce a policy of "herd immunity," allowing countless numbers of workers to contract the virus.

A mood of rebellion against the pro-corporate trade unions across the country, demonstrated above all by the creation of rank-and-file safety committees by workers at auto plants, Amazon warehouses and schools. These committees, completely independent from the unions, are fighting to build a nationwide movement to shut down nonessential production, with workers' wages fully guaranteed, in order to contain the pandemic.

In Waterloo, the indifference of the union to the plight of workers in the plant is so unconcealed that it was even acknowledged by the local press. The *Journal* interviewed several workers in an article published January 2 denouncing Local 431.

"I feel like [paying dues is] a waste of money," said one worker interviewed by the newspaper. "I'm not expecting them to go fight for me if I did something wrong ... but the things that they should do, it's like they don't want to do."

The *Journal's* reporters attempted to contact the local

dozens of times without success before the article ran. However, the UFCW later published a letter through an attorney disputing the paper's article. The letter, which was not initially made public until an open records request by the *Journal*, was sent to local public officials.

In a series of highly unusual public remarks, County Sheriff Tony Thompson, who had pleaded unsuccessfully with Tyson for weeks to close the plant last spring, accused the union of the colluding with Tyson, calling one union bureaucrat "overly complimentary" of the company during a tour of the plant last April. Another union official was "very comfortable with Tyson supervisors and far less representative of the workers who were getting sick," Thompson said.

Thompson denounced the UFCW's letter as an attempt to shield itself from liability. "They're using the same playbook that corporate Tyson is using, which I thought was kind of weird."

Thompson said, "The first thought I had was, 'Shame on Tyson corporate.' But that was very closely followed by, 'Doesn't Tyson have a union that should be protecting these people? And if they don't, why don't they? And if they do, where the hell are they?'" Thompson said.

"My role [as chair of the local Emergency Management Commission] was to try to determine why we weren't able to get that plant shut down, why we weren't getting more assistance from the people that I felt like ought to be providing us that assistance—part of which should be the union if they truly gave a s-- about their membership—and we weren't getting any of that," Thompson concluded.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to one worker at Tyson Foods Chick-N-Quick plant in Rogers, Arkansas about the conditions in his facility.

The worker, who requested to remain anonymous due to fear of retribution, said, "It's terrible right now. Right now, people are afraid and feel very unsafe. There is no protection and there are many workers who have become infected. There are some areas in the plant where the distance between workers is only a foot.

"Each worker has their station, and there are plastic barriers separating those workers from each other, but it only separates the upper portion of the person, so if someone sneezes it doesn't directly hit the person next to them. The problem is when we eat lunch. When we go to lunch we pass through the halls and it is very narrow. People are packed in like sardines. So I don't understand why there are these separators on the line, but absolutely nothing in the cafeteria or the bathrooms." The worker told the WSWS that over 200 of his coworkers had tested

positive. Tyson is also increasing the line speed each day, making work more strenuous and more difficult to maintain social distancing practices.

In response to the widespread outbreak, last month management began testing a small number of workers at the plant, trying to assess the overall spread of the virus through a small sample group of 20 workers a week. The worker told the WSWS in one week 17 out of the 20 tests were positive. This extremely high positivity rate means that the real number of infections each week is far higher.

The worker said that he was only notified of this by his coworkers, as management has worked to keep the information private, "Management doesn't tell us anything. I only found this out from coworkers, because we know each other and management is not reporting anything to the health department. They are trying to just do it at the plant and control the situation."

In response to the lack of safety measures and the rapid spread of the virus, workers at the plant are becoming increasingly angry, though they are afraid to speak out in fear of losing their jobs: "Look, workers are afraid though they want to do something. They want to file a complaint or go on strike, but people are very afraid because the company is intimidating and threatening us with disciplinary action, which means firing us."

As the COVID-19 pandemic spirals out of control in workplaces across the globe, it is imperative that workers in the meatpacking industry across Iowa, the United States and the world organize rank and file committees, independent of the unions, to join in a common struggle against the capitalist sacrificing of human lives for private profit.



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