

After government intervention to keep it open, hundreds of infections went unreported at Illinois meatpacking plant

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At least 137 COVID-19 cases at the Rochelle Foods meatpacking plant went unreported after state and federal government officials intervened to countermand a local lockdown order, according to an investigative report published last week in *USA Today*.

Although meatpacking plants have served as a key vector for the spread of the virus, particularly into rural areas of the country, information about the extent of the virus in the industry has been released only piecemeal, at the discretion of companies and management at individual sites. However, according to available reports compiled by the Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting, which contributed to last week's report, at least 45,000 meatpacking workers have been infected and 240 have died.

Rochelle Foods, a subsidiary of Hormel, employs approximately 900 workers at the plant in Rochelle, Illinois. The Ogle County Health Department intervened to shut down production at the facility on April 20. On May 1, by which time 123 workers were confirmed infected, state and federal officials intervened, convening a conference call with the Ogle County health director, lawyers for Rochelle Foods and several political appointees from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and a representative of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), high-level officials from the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), and the office of Democratic Governor Jay Robert "J. B." Pritzker's office.

According to the report, Ogle County Health Department (OCHD) Director Kyle Aumun was told by USDA officials that he had no authority to investigate or shut down production at the plant, citing Trump's

April 28 executive order invoking the Defense Production Act that forced meatpacking and food-processing facilities to keep operating in the midst of a pandemic. After the conference call had concluded, Auman recalled feeling "very manipulated."

"Rochelle Foods reopened on May 4 and, since then, no coronavirus cases have been publicly reported," the report continues. "But behind closed doors, the county health department has been fighting coronavirus outbreaks at Rochelle Foods ever since."

A second outbreak occurred in the fall, and "By mid-September, at least 137 COVID-19 cases had been reported at the plant in Rochelle." The current number of infections is likely higher, according to the report. Rochelle Foods management even intervened to prevent local health officials from publicly announcing COVID-19 testing at the plant, on the grounds that it would give the company "bad publicity."

"We essentially had to leave Rochelle Foods alone," Aumun told reporters. "They were using the act to keep people working, not to protect public health."

While the report emphasizes the role of the Trump administration, the participation of Democratic state officials, whose identities were not revealed by the report, on the May conference call is another demonstration that the policy of unsafe workplace reopenings has enjoyed broad bipartisan support. The newly-inaugurated Biden administration has already made clear that one of its main goals is to reopen schools as quickly as possible in order to send parents back to work. Biden also falsely claimed that there is "nothing we can do" to halt the spread of coronavirus, in spite of the fact that his own transition team's public health adviser, infectious diseases expert Dr. Michael

Osterholm, has called for a national lockdown with government compensation for laid-off workers.

As for Illinois governor J.B. Pritzker, he spearheaded school reopenings last fall, even though he was forced to later acknowledge that workplaces and schools are the chief vectors of transmission. Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, also a Democrat, is threatening teachers with legal action if they continue to refuse to return for in-person instruction.

The state of Illinois has had more than 1.1 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 since last spring, and 20,853 deaths, according to the Worldometer website. Nearly ten percent of Ogle County, where the city of Rochelle is located, has also tested positive, with 4,700 cases and 72 deaths.

The cover-up could not have been accomplished without the support of the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW), whose Local 1546 nominally represents Rochelle Foods workers. The UFCW has not even publicly acknowledged the report. There is no reference to the facility at all, either on the website and social media accounts of the local or of the national union. However, on April 23, three days after Rochelle Foods had been shut down, the UFCW praised the measures which companies were allegedly taking to prevent infections in a conference call with reporters. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, one of the measures which the UFCW praised were temporary bonuses to encourage workers to remain on the job.

Workers on the job-hosting website indeed.com gave scathing descriptions of the union. “The union is corrupt and [doesn't] do anything,” one worker wrote. Said another: “The union is in the [company's] pocket and doesn't do anything for you. Grievances don't get filed and if they do the union rep just sits there and doesn't say anything.”

The guilty silence of the UFCW is of a piece with its role in meatpacking plants across the country. In Waterloo, Iowa, the union worked out attendance bonuses with management at a Tyson pork plant even as managers were lying to the public about the spread of infections in the plant and privately were taking bets on how many workers would become infected. Five workers at the facility eventually died.

The union's support for Tyson management was so craven that even the local sheriff felt compelled to denounce them as agents of the company. Meanwhile,

in response to growing anger from workers and increasing scrutiny from the press, the local has retreated behind its lawyers, while leaving dozens of media inquiries unanswered.

The UFCW's collusion with management to keep plants open and running is part and parcel with the role of unions throughout the US and the world, including the United Auto Workers and American Federation of Teachers, all of whom have kept workers on the job in spite of mass infections and deaths. This is the produce of the character of these outlived organizations as little more than labor contractors, completely integrated with management.

The way forward against the policies of "herd immunity" is the formation of rank-and-file safety committees, independent of and opposed to the unions and the Democratic and Republican parties. The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* is assisting workers to build up a network of these committees at workplaces and schools throughout the country.



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