Smithfield meatpackers in South Dakota reject local contract by 99 percent, press for strike action

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Meatpacking workers at a Smithfield Foods pork plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota rejected a proposed contract by a 99 percent margin on June 3, setting up a potential strike at a facility that provides five percent of the country's pork production. A strike vote is being conducted by the United Food and Commercial Workers union on Monday.

The contract rejection is a further demonstration of the enormous pent-up anger and opposition among workers after a year of social murder by the world's governments and major corporations over the course of the pandemic. In country after country, miners, health care workers, teachers and educators, autoworkers and other key sections of the working class are conducting strikes and protests.

Increasingly, corporate demands for more sacrifice, which have been supported by the trade unions, are being met with militant refusal by workers. On Sunday, Volvo Truck workers in southwestern Virginia voted down a second contract proposal by an overwhelming 90 percent, and in April, miners at Warrior Met Coal in Alabama rejected an agreement by 1,006 to 45. The deals had been backed by the United Auto Workers and United Mine Workers of America unions, respectively.

The meatpacking industry was already among the most unsafe in the United States before the pandemic, with one of the highest rates of industrial accidents, primarily repetitive motion injuries. Notoriously, it has also been among the worst hit by the coronavirus.

Nearly 30 percent of the 194,000 meatpacking workers in the United States have tested positive over the past year and at least 296 have died, according to the Food and Environment Reporting Network. Unsanitary and cramped conditions on the line, where proper cleaning and social distancing protocols are impossible, have made such figures inevitable.

Meatpacking plants have also been major transmission vectors into the wider community, particularly in rural areas. According to researchers from University of California, Davis, counties with large beef- or pork-packing facilities had infection rates more than double that of similar counties during the first 150 days of the pandemic. Another study by researchers from Columbia and the University of Chicago linked as many as 310,000 infections and 5,200 deaths to outbreaks at nearby meatpacking plants.

The Sioux Falls plant was the site of one of the earliest major outbreaks in the industry. Out of a workforce of 3,700, 1,294 have been infected and four have died, according to OSHA. At one point last April, the plant accounted for the large majority of coronavirus infections in the state of South Dakota. Following protests by workers, the plant was temporarily idled.

Opposition is mounting inside the plant, expressed indirectly by huge rates of absenteeism, with hundreds of workers out on long-term medical leave. Forty-nine people quit over the previous week alone, according to UFCW Local 304A President B.J. Motley.

In spite of the public health disaster centered on the plant, Smithfield is arrogantly demanding increases of roughly $200 per year to workers' out-of-pocket healthcare expenses. Workers at the plant already make below the area average for the industry, with a starting wage of $17 per hour compared to $19 at a nearby JBS plant. The UFCW has said it is asking the company to back off on its health care demands and increase starting wages to the level of JBS.

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"We're not heroes anymore, are we?" a worker with nine years at the plant, Anthony Yesker, told the Associated Press. "They should at least look that we all put our lives on the line to keep the company going."

While the constant refrain in every contract negotiation is that there is simply not enough money to pay workers livable wages, provide fully paid health care and retirement, and ensure safe working conditions, this is belied by the huge sums handed over to corporate executives and shareholders throughout the social and economic crisis triggered by the pandemic. In Smithfield's case, its parent company, Hong Kong's WH Group, the biggest pork processor in the world, announced over the weekend that it will spend up to $1.9 billion in a new share repurchase program in order to drive up its stock price, a move that will primarily benefit the company's largest investors.

The UFCW has felt compelled to hold a strike vote, due to the provocative demands by management and widespread anger among workers. However, throughout the pandemic the union has played the main role in ensuring the continuation of production in order to maintain the company's flow of profits. The UFCW thus bears direct responsibility for the deaths at Smithfield and other facilities throughout the country.

While Motley is now posturing as an opponent of management, Smithfield, for its own reasons, was able to cite a statement by Motley from last May praising the limited safety measures introduced by the company during its shutdown. "Smithfield is doing everything they can for the employees and their safety," Motley said at the time. "We stand with Smithfield to get this plant back open."

Similar statements were made last year by local UFCW officials at plants throughout the country. The most egregious example was at Tyson's pork plant in Waterloo, Iowa, where the local even worked with management to introduce a perfect attendance bonus as hundreds were falling sick in the facility, and as management was taking bets on the number of workers who would catch the virus. When a scandal broke out over the betting scheme last fall, the UFCW hid behind its lawyers in response to local press inquiries. The response prompted even local Sheriff Tony Thompson, head of the county's emergency response team, to observe that the union was "very comfortable with Tyson supervisors and far less representative of the workers who were getting sick."

"The first thought I had was, 'Shame on Tyson corporate,'" Thompson said. "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?'"

There is little reason to doubt that the Sioux Falls workers will vote to authorize a strike. However, a victorious struggle requires that they take the initiative into their own hands, as workers at Volvo Truck are doing in Virginia, by forming a rank-and-file committee to wage a direct struggle against both management and their lackeys in the union. For more information about forming a rank-and-file committee at your workplace, visit wsws.org/workers and sign up today.

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