

Foster Farms meatpacking workers vote to strike at California facility

Rafael Azul
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On July 18 workers at the Foster Farms chicken processing plant in Compton, California voted down a contract proposal by the company that would have slashed their health care benefits. The last contract for the 250 workers at the plant, many of whom are paid the hourly minimum wage for Los Angeles County of \$15.00 per hour, expired last year, but had been extended by the Teamsters union.

The plant, located in an impoverished and dilapidated working class neighborhood in Los Angeles County (with household incomes of under \$30,000), employs immigrant and black workers, who have few other options for employment. There is a permanently placed sign on the front of the plant offering jobs, suggesting a large turnover.

According to a July 20 statement from Teamsters Local 630, the workers at the plant voted near unanimously against a company proposal that will force them to pay a much larger share of their own health costs than currently. “For example, workers would be forced to pay 20 percent of medical costs frequently utilized by women with families, such as labor and delivery, emergency room visits and mental health services,” according to the Local 630 statement.

However, the Teamsters also indicated that they had already offered concessions on health benefits that “would save Foster Farms close to \$500,000 in the first year and at least \$1.5 million over the life of the contract.” The union did not give details of how this would occur. Furthermore, the statement indicates that over 90 plant employees have been infected by COVID-19.

The Compton plant’s cases are just a small sliver of the more than 50,000 cases nationwide in the meatpacking industry, according to the Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting. At least 259 meatpacking

workers have died in 67 different plants in 29 states.

Not all the cases have been reported. “It’s also difficult to get exact numbers because some companies, some states and some unions have refused to release or confirm numbers,” according to the Midwest Center.

In May 2021, the company and its labor contractor “Human Bees” were fined \$181,500 by the State of California for repeated negligence toward the workers’ health and safety. Two of the inspections, resulting in fines of \$174,925, were triggered by employee fatalities, which were not reported by the company and its “staffing services,” Human Bees, Inc., Marcos Renteria Ag Services, Inc. and others.

The violations included lack of sufficient distancing between workers, many of whom are forced to work elbow-to-elbow, and lack of safety barriers.

The unions bear responsibility for the disastrous impact of the pandemic at Foster Farms and other meatpacking plants. There are over a dozen Foster Farms chicken processing plants in California and the Pacific Northwest. The unionized workforce includes the Teamsters, United Farm Workers, United Food and Commercial Workers, and the International Association of Machinists, all of which collaborate with management in a slave-like regime of poverty wages, enforced overtime, and cramped and unsafe working conditions.

Last December, the United Farm Workers filed a lawsuit over conditions in the Livingston plant in Merced County, California, accusing Foster Farms of operating in “naked disregard of both national and local guidelines.” UFW attorneys called the lawsuit a “last resort to save workers’ lives.”

The lawsuit asked that Foster Farms operate according to emergency rules issued by Merced County in August of 2020. However, it did not demand that the

plant be closed, or campaign that workers go on strike until the violations were remedied.

Local 630 has not announced when, or if, the strike at Compton will take place. This weekend it has called for a rally at a nearby supermarket, which will include local politicians, religious figures and Teamsters bureaucrats. A similar protest rally that took place on April 26, in the vicinity of the plant, did nothing to resolve any of the outstanding issues.

Negotiations between the Teamsters and Foster Farms continue in the presence of a mediator. Last April, scores of union-organized workers picketed the plant to demand a resolution to this contract dispute.

The union statement also quotes Teamsters General President James P. Hoffa: “If Foster Farms is not willing to give our members a fair return on their work and honor their contributions during the pandemic, we have thousands of Teamsters across California and the country who are ready to take on that fight.”

Hoffa’s bluster is a fraud. While there is no doubt that the many thousands of workers are ready to join the struggle, neither the Teamsters nor the other unions at Foster Farms will call them out.

To mobilize support for their struggle, workers at Foster Farms plants must set up rank-and-file committees, independent of the corrupt Teamsters bureaucracy, to unite their struggle with those of workers across the country for decent wages, benefits and working conditions.



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