

US congressional report documents criminal indifference to health and safety by meatpackers during pandemic

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The five largest US meatpackers oversaw mass COVID-19 infections and deaths in their factories and then tried to cover up the data, according to a report released Wednesday by the House of Representatives subcommittee investigating the impact of the coronavirus.

At least 59,000 workers were infected with COVID-19, and 269 died between March 1, 2020 and February 1, 2021 at Tyson Foods, Smithfield Foods, JBS, Cargill and National. The five companies account for the bulk of meat processing in the country. The number reported was nearly three times higher than the figure of 22,400 that the United Food and Commercial Workers said were infected or exposed.

The report stated, “Instead of addressing the clear indications that workers were contracting the coronavirus at alarming rates due to conditions in meatpacking facilities, meatpacking companies prioritized profits and production over worker safety.”

The report confirms what is already well known to meatpacking workers and covered extensively by the *World Socialist Web Site*, that food processing giants, with the vital assistance of the reactionary trade union bureaucracies, criminally disregarded the health and safety of workers, their families and the broader community as the meatpacking industry became a vector for the transmission of the deadly virus. The utter disregard for life was epitomized by managers at one Tyson plant, who took bets on which workers would be infected by COVID-19.

The prioritization of profits over the health and safety of workers and the general public is the policy of not only the meatpacking industry, but characterizes the policy of the US government and all major capitalist governments throughout the world. In the United States alone this has resulted in an official death toll exceeding 750,000, along with incalculable human suffering.

The report by the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis was based on an analysis of data on

deaths and infections from meatpacking companies, as well as a review of more than 150,000 pages of company documents, workers’ complaints, health department records, company communications and other sources. The committee noted that the total number of infections and deaths certainly exceeded the reported numbers because the reported numbers excluded off-site testing and self-reported cases.

The meatpacking industry emerged early in the pandemic as a major vector for the spread of the disease. In many plants, workers stand “packed like sardines,” literally shoulder to shoulder in an environment ideal for the transmission of the virus. A report published by Charles Taylor of Columbia University and Christopher Boulos and Douglas Almond of the University of Chicago showed that outbreaks at meatpacking plants were responsible for 8 percent of all coronavirus cases in the early months of the pandemic.

A separate study by the University of California at Davis tied 334,000 COVID-19 cases to the meatpacking industry, causing \$11 billion in economic damage. Counties with meat or pork processing plants had infection rates double that of other counties.

Tyson Foods alone accounted for almost 29,500 infections and 151 deaths. The company with the next highest totals was JBS USA, which had 12,859 infections and 62 deaths. The House subcommittee cited figures at certain meatpacking plants with high rates of infection, including a JBS plant in Hyrum, Utah, where 54 percent of the workforce contracted the virus between March 2020 and early 2021. Nearly 50 percent of workers at a Tyson plant in Amarillo, Texas were infected. Forty-four percent of workers at National Beef’s plant in Tama, Iowa contracted the coronavirus.

Time and again, workers have stood up to oppose these conditions, only to have their actions blocked and sabotaged by the procompany unions. With the assistance of the WSWWS, workers in auto plants, meatpacking, education and

health care began to build rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, to organize collective resistance to these deadly conditions in the workplace. This culminated with the launching this past May of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The report by the Democratic-controlled House subcommittee focuses its criticism on the policies of the Trump administration, which operated shamelessly on behalf of the meatpacking companies to force workers into deadly workplaces. However, the policies of the Democratic Party and the trade unions do not differ in any significant respect. Congressional Democrats supported the decision by the Trump administration to declare meatpacking a “critical” industry, based on false claims of an impending shortage of meat. Recently released U.S. Department of Agriculture documents show that the US had more than adequate stocks at the time.

While intended as damage control, the House subcommittee report lifted the lid on the scandalous lack of protection for worker health and safety. Prior to the House report, the main source of information on the spread of COVID-19 in US meatpacking plants had been the Food and Environment Reporting Network (FERN) COVID-19 Mapping Project, which compiled figures based on publicly available data. FERN had reported 22,694 cases and 88 deaths among workers at the five companies in the House report as of September 8, 2021.

Indeed, so lax and haphazard are government reporting and monitoring that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) told the House committee that it had come to rely on FERN, a small news operation with eight employees, for data. However, FERN recently had to suspend its data reporting due to difficulty in obtaining figures.

The House subcommittee report singled out Smithfield Foods for opposing attempts by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to shut down operations at its pork plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota after a major outbreak that infected 853 out of the plant’s 3,500 employees. However, in its push to reopen, management had the support of the United Food and Commercial Workers, with the local union president declaring, “Smithfield is doing everything they can for the employees and their safety. We stand with Smithfield to get this plant back open.”

In September, OSHA fined Smithfield a paltry \$13,494 for “failing to protect employees from exposure to the coronavirus.” At least four workers died from COVID-19 at the plant. The fine was the largest allowed under the nation’s labor law. That did not stop Smithfield from

vigorously protesting even that token amount.

In fact, OSHA issued just nine citations to three meatpacking companies with severe outbreaks in 2020, while reducing inspections by 35 percent, the report stated.

Despite the devastating exposure of their criminal disregard for workers’ lives, the executives of the companies named in this report can rest easy with the assurance that the Democrats will take no measures to hold anyone accountable. Like so many other reports, it will be quickly shelved and forgotten while the abuses continue.

The disregard for workers’ lives in the meatpacking industry is typical of the approach taken by all sectors of big business during the pandemic. The maniacal focus on the extraction of profit to maintain bloated stock valuations and the callous disregard for human life exhibited throughout the pandemic are symptoms of a deeply diseased social order. No rational and humane approach to ending the pandemic is possible without a direct challenge by the working class to capitalist private property interests.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Parties around the world have insisted since the outbreak of the pandemic on the critical necessity for the working class to develop its own independent response based on a socialist program.

We have sought to initiate the formation of independent workplace committees to lead the fight for health and safety, while imparting to the working class the scientific understanding of the nature of pandemic that is needed to address the crisis. As the October 24 webinar sponsored by the WSWS and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) “How to end the pandemic” demonstrated, there is a wide audience for this approach.

Only the coordinated action of the international working class can bring an end to the deadly pandemic and ensure a future for humankind.



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