

Tyson Foods lifts mask mandate as states abandon COVID health measures

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The meat packing giant Tyson Foods announced Tuesday that it would be ending its company-wide mask mandate for all vaccinated workers. Tyson is second largest meat packing company in the world with 139,000 employees across the globe, including 120,000 in the United States.

Following a company-wide vaccine mandate last summer, 96 percent of Tyson workers have received at least two doses of Pfizer or Moderna's vaccines or one dose of the Johnson and Johnson vaccine. However, while nearly all Tyson employees are eligible under the new guidelines, workers must still wear masks if required by local or state health officials.

Additionally, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) still requires masks for all meat packing workers at packaging facilities where it conducts inspections if there are "substantial" or "high" levels of transmission. Nearly all US counties remain at this level of community transmission.

The bulk of employees affected will be at offices and distribution centers, as well as some sites inspected by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which may go maskless if local guidance allows it.

However, while the majority of Tyson employees will not be immediately effected by the decision, that may change rapidly in the coming weeks.

Across the country, states and local health officials are lifting mask mandates in promotion of the myth of the coronavirus pandemic becoming "endemic." Over the last two weeks, 11 states and Washington D.C. have lifted indoor mask mandates, including New York and California, which saw massive surges of cases and deaths over the winter, and New Jersey, which has removed mask mandates for schools.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has followed this wave of abandonment of mask

mandates at the state level by declaring that it is considering repealing federal mask wearing guidance.

"We want to give people a break from things like mask-wearing when these metrics are better, and then have the ability to reach for them again should things worsen," said Rochelle Walensky, director of the CDC, earlier this week.

"As we have fewer cases, people will become more comfortable with taking off their mask, but we will certainly want people to have the flexibility to wear one if they so choose."

This open promotion of a policy of mass infection was echoed by Jeff Zients, the White House COVID response coordinator, who said Wednesday that "We're moving toward a time when COVID isn't a crisis, but it's something we can protect against and treat. The president and our COVID team are actively planning for the future."

He also noted that the White House was working closely with business leaders and state governments on how best to implement this strategy. Expressing this, Tyson spokesman Derek Burleson stated that 'We're definitely working with USDA on what this might look like at each of our [Food Safety and Inspection Service]-inspected facilities. We're working to try to expand this to more facilities.'

Given the pace at which state and federal officials are moving to abandon all public health measures, the decision of Tyson to lift its mask mandate is a prelude to the coming deluge of corporate and governmental actions that will allow COVID to spread unimpeded.

Tyson's announcement was preceded by similar decisions by Walmart and Amazon, the two largest private employers in the country. Companies like Facebook and Microsoft have also set dates for workers to return to the office after they had moved to remote

work during the height of the Omicron surge.

Such decisions will have disastrous effects as new, more contagious and virulent variants develop and spread around the world. Variant BA.2, a mutation of Omicron, has been found to be both more deadly and more contagious than Omicron, and as access to vaccines in underdeveloped countries remains scarce, the threat of global spread remains high.

The danger to meat packing workers in particular is especially severe. Meat packing plants were some of the worst-hit workplaces around the world during the initial phase of the pandemic. Tens of thousands of meat packing workers, largely from poor rural communities—many of whom are immigrants and refugees from Africa and Southeast Asia—were infected within months of the pandemic's arrival in the United States.

A recent congressional report found that 86,000 workers were infected and 423 killed, including 100 at Tyson alone. However, no official figures were collected on cases and deaths in the industry, suggesting that case and death rates could be much higher. One study on the industry found that by July 21, 2020, the meat packing industry could be connected with upwards of 310,000 cases and 5,200 deaths, 8 and 4 percent of national totals respectively at the time.

This state of mass infection occurred as management and the Trump administration kept workers on the job and the United Food and Commercial Workers union colluded with the companies to prevent plant closures. Ultimately, it was only the wildcat walkouts and protests of meat packing workers that temporarily shut down production and secured improved safety measures.

Despite improvements since the beginning of the pandemic, the risk to meat packing workers remains high. Even while the vast majority of workers are vaccinated, the BA.2 variant has been found to be resistant to just two doses of vaccine and may reduce the effectiveness of boosters.

Workers also continue to work in horrific conditions. Line speeds remain dangerously high in overcrowded plants and the aforementioned congressional report on meat packing found that at a Tyson plant in Amarillo, Texas, workers had been wearing completely saturated masks, making them effectively dangerous to the user.

The turn of states and major companies to abolish

mask mandates, in the face of the obvious risks, is bound up with the inflationary crisis of American capitalism. Following two years of immense financial speculation, fueled by the trillions of dollars pumped into markets by the federal reserve, corporations like Tyson must extract as much value from their workers as possible to prevent a collapse of their financial stability. These are the same forces compelling state governments to lift mask mandates and the CDC to give into corporate pressure.

By lifting mask mandates and promoting the lie that the pandemic has come to an end, the ruling class aims to end all interruptions to production and protect its profit interest. Companies like Tyson are fully aware that their decisions may cause further illness and death among their workers, but they cannot tolerate the inconvenience of even the minimal effort to save human life. Fundamentally, the profit drive of capitalism has determined that workers must continue to die for the interests of the capitalist class.



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