

Congressional report confirms meat processors made baseless claims of impending food shortage to keep plants open as pandemic spread

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A report released this week by a US congressional subcommittee confirmed that meatpacking companies conspired with the Trump administration to keep processing plants open during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, falsely claiming there was an impending meat shortage.

The House Select Committee on the Coronavirus Crisis found that Tyson Foods drafted a statement that became the basis for an executive order by the Trump administration declaring meatpacking facilities “critical infrastructure” to force them to remain open in defiance of orders by public health officials. Meat processing plants were significant early vectors of transmission of the deadly coronavirus.

Tracking by Investigate Midwest found that through October 2021 at least 400 meat plant workers had died from COVID-19 and 86,000 had been infected. A study by researchers at Columbia University and University of Chicago found that between 236,000 and 310,000 coronavirus infections through July 21, 2020, in the US occurred near a meatpacking plant, comprising 6 to 8 percent of all infections at the time.

The House committee reported, “While meatpacking companies—Smithfield and Tyson in particular—asserted that reduced plant operations and worker absenteeism were making the food supply chain ‘vulnerable,’ 69 documents obtained by the Select Subcommittee suggest that this narrative lacked any basis in fact and show that others in the industry believed it was false.”

It reported that there were in fact “abundant supplies.” It noted, for example, “According to the National Agricultural Statistics Service, meatpackers held 622 million pounds of frozen pork as of March 31, 2020—an amount well above levels predating the pandemic.” Pork exports to China during this period were surging, reaching a record high.

Trump’s executive order had nothing to do with protecting

food supplies and everything to do with protecting meat company’s profits. The crowded and unsanitary conditions in meatpacking plants were ideal transmission grounds for COVID-19. This fact was recognized early in the pandemic by public health officials, who took measures to limit the operations of large meat processors in a number of midwestern communities that were witnessing an explosion of COVID-19 cases and deaths. The dangers were also apparent to food industry executives, but instead of protecting workers they sought to conceal and downplay the risks.

The meat industry responded with a furious counterattack to the orders by public health officials to temporarily halt some operations. Following the closure of a Smithfield Food plant in South Dakota in early April, Smithfield CEO Ken Sullivan issued a public statement warning that such closures were “pushing our country perilously close to the edge in terms of our [nation’s] meat supply.” Sullivan reached out to other meatpacking CEOs to concoct a plan to lobby the Trump administration to invoke the Defense Production Act to declare the meat plants “critical infrastructure,” blocking them from closure and at the same time shielding the food companies from lawsuits by workers or their families.

One executive worried that the scheme, “If not handled right, it could come across as all the industry is interested in is ‘production at any cost.’” However, these scruples were quickly overcome.

The report highlighted the remarks of Chicken Council vice president and lobbyist Ashley Peterson who stated bluntly, “Now to get rid of those pesky health departments!”

This murderous plan relied critically on the collaboration of the unions, in particular the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and the Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU). During the first weeks of the

pandemic spontaneous strikes and protests by meatpacking workers broke out over unsafe conditions, in many cases forcing temporary closures. The reaction of the unions in every case was to attempt to tamp down the protests and force workers back on the job. In some cases the unions collaborated with management to offer attendance bonuses to encourage workers to stay on the job in the midst of COVID-19 outbreaks.

An earlier report by the same House subcommittee found that the meatpacking companies deliberately undercounted the number of infections and deaths at their plants by as much as a factor of three. At least 59,000 workers were infected and 269 died between March 1, 2020, and February 1, 2021, at the five largest US meat processors. That number was nearly three times the 22,400 cases reported by the UFCW.

The totally concocted nature of the supposed food shortage touted by meat company executives used to justify prioritizing profits over health has long been open knowledge. A June 2020 lawsuit filed by the public advocacy group Food and Water Watch against the meatpacking giants for sacrificing worker health and safety pointed to public documents to expose the false claims of a food shortage. It wrote, “This fear mongering creates a revenue-generating feedback loop. ... It stokes and exploits consumer panic—juicing demand and sales—and in turn, provides the company with a false justification to keep its slaughterhouses operating at full tilt, subjecting its workers to unsafe workplace health and safety conditions that have caused thousands of Smithfield workers to contract the virus.”

In a statement dripping with hypocrisy, Democratic House subcommittee chairman James Clyburn condemned the meatpacking executives and Trump administration officials for an “effort to force workers to remain on the job during the coronavirus crisis despite dangerous conditions, and even to prevent the imposition of commonsense mitigation measures.” It continued, “This coordinated campaign prioritized industry production over the health of workers and communities, and contributed to tens of thousands of workers becoming ill, hundreds of workers dying, and the virus spreading throughout surrounding areas.”

But this is exactly the policy the Democratic Biden administration has pursued since taking office. First in its single-minded focus on reopening public schools despite clear evidence that they were major vectors of transmission of the virus and then its systematic dismantling of all mitigation measures, despite the emergence of new and more deadly variants of the virus.

Despite the damning revelations regarding the food industry executives, the House report will be filed and

quickly forgotten, no criminal actions will be initiated and no moves to seize the profits of the food processing giants to compensate workers, their families and the wider public devastated by the single-minded pursuit of profit at the expense of public health.

In fact the food processing industry and big business as a whole continue to profit massively off the pandemic.

Four of the country’s biggest meat processors—including Tyson and JBS USA—together increased their profits 120 percent compared with before the pandemic. Their net income rose 500 percent.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported Thursday that Tyson increased its net income for the second quarter to \$829 million from \$476 million one year earlier because of higher profit margins at its beef and chicken divisions. It had \$13.1 billion in quarterly sales compared with \$11.3 billion last year. The meat companies along with oil and gas and other major industries have been able to profit handsomely during the pandemic, siphoning off billions in free government cash while using the resulting inflationary price spiral to shamelessly profiteer at the expense of consumers.

The facts outlined in the House report are an indictment not just of the meatpacking executives, but the entire political establishment that have collaborated with the corporations at all stages of the pandemic to prioritize profit over human lives. The Democratic House leadership may posture a bit, but it will take no action. However, workers must draw vital conclusions, in the first place the necessity of taking the production of food and other vital necessities out of private ownership and placing them under the democratic social ownership and control of the working class.



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