

Workers at Tyson poultry plant in Arkansas strike against plant's closure

J. L'Heureau
13 April 2023

Workers at a Tyson poultry plant in Van Buren, Arkansas, went on strike this week in response to the company's announcement last month that it was shuttering the plant in May. Another poultry plant in Glen Allen, Virginia, has also been slated for closure as part of the company's restructuring operations, in response to a record drop in profits over the past six months.

The plant closures would see up to 1,700 layoffs combined. Many have already left at the Van Buren plant, which employed over 900 workers before the company's announcement. This has increased the production demands for the workers remaining, exacerbating the already dangerous conditions at the plant.

The company offered a pittance of \$1,000 for workers to stay at the plant up to its closure, while offering a severance package including a percentage of vacation time accrued. It has also offered \$15,000—to be allocated over two years—to assist relocating workers from Arkansas to Texas, a miserable handout many workers at the plant are refusing to budge on.

While not officially in a union, the strike has come under the sway of the Springdale, Arkansas-based group, Venceremos. As word of the strike was made public, the group issued a statement outlining the workers' demands, which include: 1) "Equal treatment compared to supervisors and corporate employees," 2) "Full payout of unused vacation time at the end of employment," 3) "Full accountability for workers' compensation claims, which Tyson has historically dodged or retaliated against," and 4) "Fair working conditions."

Many workers at the plant have been there for decades, with some employed there before Tyson acquired it in 1986.

Meatpacking workers have been some of the hardest hit by the refusal to shut down production during the pandemic, with at least 59,000 infected in the US between March 2020 and February 2021. Several lawsuits—in

Texas, Iowa and Arkansas—have been filed by workers and their family members against Tyson, seeking redress from the company's lack of COVID-19 protocols in its plants, which led to mass infections and deaths.

Venceremos posted a video interview on its Facebook page of several workers who detailed the hardships they have been forced to endure throughout their many years of working for the multimillion dollar and multinational company. Three of the workers interviewed spoke in Spanish, with their comments translated by the interviewer.

One worker said: "We have worked here, some of us 14, some of us 20, some of us 30 years. We have done grueling work in unsafe, hazardous working conditions for Tyson, never complaining, and when we did, when we brought these conditions forward, they were suppressed. We have done nothing but work hard on behalf of Tyson. They called us 'heroes' of the pandemic, well, after the pandemic they increased the line speed to about 42 birds per minute, which is unfair and unjust for us.

"The different types of poultry being produced here often require automated machines just to keep up with the amount of speed that the production line is at. However, when these machines break down, it is an unrealistic expectation that Tyson has for its workers to meet the demands these machines fill. Often this results in us not getting breaks, it results in us having injuries, of course which Tyson denies are work-related.

"Tyson likes to boast that they have in-house nursing staff and medical staff ready to assist workers whenever they become injured. However, I've often seen countless colleagues go to the nursing staff with complaints of injuries within the workplace, with excruciating pain, only to be given false remedies and told there was no need to report it to their primary physician, or there was no need for Tyson to report a claim and workers compensation or any sort of injury out of fear that it might attract

regulators.

“Workers time after time, even after complaining about the unsafe, unsanitary, and borderline hazardous conditions, are told to get back to work regardless, and they willingly continue to do their job out of fear and intimidation for their families. They choose to keep working, and they find it ridiculous and unfair that after all these years of working in unsafe and unsanitary work conditions and being told to keep their head down and suppression by upper management that the slap in the face they received was \$1,000 stipend which after taxes comes out to little more than \$600.

“Tyson likes to brag about its treatment of employees. However, recently we have found that all the workers share the sentiment that our labor has not been valued. After they called us the heroes of the pandemic, they have done nothing but increase workloads without fair compensation, often resulting in injury, and time after time Tyson has done nothing about it.

“We have been fed lies by our own direct supervisors who claimed when it was announced that the plant closure would happen that they would fight on our behalf to ensure we receive the same benefits in pay and compensation that they received. We were lied to, and if you ask any of the workers here who feed this nation, who are on the poultry line, they will tell you they feel that Tyson has treated them unfairly and in a terrible manner.”

Another worker said, “Many of the workers simply want what is owed to them—fair compensation for their labor and for Tyson to take accountability for the numerous injuries that have occurred because of their own willful ignorance.”

A worker who has been at the plant for 16 years said, “After the plant closure, Tyson has done nothing but make us feel like we are less than our supervisors. We have been treated as if we are not equal, and all we are asking for is equal treatment. And to those of you who are listening to us, we ask for your support and to stand in solidarity with us for all we are asking for is equal and fair treatment.”

These comments will certainly resonate with workers in many industries all over the world who face similar unsafe working conditions. At Amazon, the auto factories, the railroads or the mines, the financial oligarchs have cut production costs, slashed wages and laid off workers to boost their bottom lines with the unyielding assistance of the central banks and political establishments.

Equally complicit in this assault on workers’ livelihoods is the corporate trade union apparatuses and

their pseudo-left lackeys, which, as the *World Socialist Web Site* recently wrote, “falsely claim to represent and fight for the interests of workers”.

In this regard, workers on strike at the Van Buren plant must be warned of the political connections of Venceremos, which is one of over two dozen member groups and unions aligned with the Food Chain Workers Alliance (FCWA), a non-profit and non-governmental coalition.

Founded one year after three of its initial groups met at a Labor Notes conference in 2008, the FCWA today boasts of “representing over 375,000 food workers in the US and Canada”. Magaly Licolli, co-founder and director of Venceremos, currently sits on the FCWA’s board of directors.

While it claims to be “supporting food workers to join together to challenge corporations and win power in their workplaces and communities,” the FCWA, whose members include the Teamsters Joint Council 7, Teamsters local 63, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), Unite Here!, and United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) local 770, has done nothing to mobilize its members to join the striking Van Buren workers in a nationwide strike against Tyson.

It has not published an appeal to the over 140,000 Tyson workers around the globe, including the 700 UFCW members at the Glen Allen plant in Virginia for support. As of this writing, none of the aforementioned unions, which collectively sit on *over one billion dollars* in assets, have made a single post on their websites or social media pages about the strike in Van Buren.

As the WSWS previously wrote, the only viable strategy for workers against Tyson’s assault on their living conditions is through independent rank-and-file committees that reject the reins of the union bureaucracy and fight for the economic, social and political demands of the entire working class. It is this determined and unified instrument of class struggle, in allegiance with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, that the WSWS stands ready to assist Tyson workers in building today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact