

Chicken processors Tyson and Perdue under federal investigation for child-labor violations

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Mega chicken processors Tyson Foods and Perdue are under investigation for child-labor law violations in their Parksley, Virginia plants after a report in the *New York Times Magazine* last week revealed that migrant children were working the midnight shift cleaning and sanitizing the chicken processing equipment.?? The investigation is the most recent revelation of the exploitation of migrant children and trampling of child-labor laws by major, multinational corporations in the United States.

The allegations of child-labor law violations against Tyson and Perdue are only the most recent levied against meat processing companies this year in the United States. As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported last February, JBS Foods, Tyson, and Cargill were among companies staffed by Packers Sanitation Services Inc. (PSSI) based in southwestern Wisconsin is one of a number of staffing agencies funneling underage children into the darkest recesses of the food production supply chain.

While PSSI was fined \$1.5 million for employing 102 children at 13 US meatpacking plants where they cleaned the facility on the overnight shift, the companies that profited from the childrens' labor were not investigated.

According to OSHA, workers who clean slaughterhouses and meat packing plants face hazards that include floors that are slippery with blood, and other animal waste, powerful machinery used for cutting through flesh and bone, and caustic chemicals and high pressure hoses used to clean and sanitize the equipment and floors.

Workers suffer musculoskeletal injuries, chemical burns and are exposed to biological agents such as methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA). Poultry workers face increased risk of lung cancer,

thought to be the result of inhaled chemicals and viruses.

The Department of Labor has extended its investigation to the contractors hired by Perdue and Tyson in Virginia to clean the plants. Fayette Industrial, which works with Perdue, and QSI, which works with Tyson, say they were not aware of the federal investigations. Both companies stated they have policies against child labor.

The exploitation of child labor in meat processing plants is widely known by government agencies. Unlike the Department of Labor which cannot monitor all of the workplaces under its jurisdiction, the Department of Agriculture has inspectors in meat plants every day. The *New York Times* reported that it was common knowledge among food safety inspectors that there are children working in meat processing plants, but they felt it was not their responsibility to report child-labor law violations.

According to the *Times* exposé, Tyson and Perdue, which together process a third of the chicken consumed in the US, succumbed to the allure of migrant child labor because turnover in their processing plants was so high; up to 50-percent annually. These children, who often have crossed into the United States alone, are desperate for work in order to pay their debt to migrant smugglers, pay room and board to their sponsors, and to send money home to sustain their families in Central America. Often only 13 or 14 years old, they are able to obtain documents stating that they are of working age, which hiring contractors for the corporations conveniently do not scrutinize.

In recent years, masses of migrant children have been sent to the United States to earn money to send home to their families in the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, which continue

to suffer the devastating economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) of 2008 allows unaccompanied migrant children (UAC) to cross into the United States while they undergo screening by the Department of Homeland Security rather than risk the dangerous border towns where adult migrants must wait. This cutout in immigration law has allowed the number of unaccompanied minors crossing into the United States to explode.

In 2019, the number of unaccompanied migrant children apprehended at the border reached a record 79,000. In 2021, the first year of the pandemic, apprehensions reached 112,192. Since 2021, 300,000 UACs have entered the United States.

As reported by the *World Socialist Web Site* in May, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which is charged with the supervision of unaccompanied migrant children once they are screened and released to their sponsors, is overwhelmed by the number of UACs in recent years.

Early in the Biden administration, as shelters overflowed and children were housed in jail-like settings, HHS began to expedite the release of UACs to their sponsors. Admittedly, the agency loses track of over 40 percent of migrant children soon after their initial check-in with their sponsors.

While the families of unaccompanied minors arrange for parents, relatives or, less frequently, family friends in the United States to sponsor their children, according to the *New York Times*, 90 percent of the UACs in Parksley, Virginia are sponsored by adults who are not a parent.

Last spring, a number of Republican controlled state legislatures rolled back restrictions on child labor in response to the tight labor market, which has made it difficult for businesses to fill low wage jobs. Children as young as 14 and 15 can now do the menial work in restaurants and on construction sites in several states.

It is no surprise then that government agencies have turned a blind eye to the plight of immigrant children working some of the most dangerous jobs in the United States.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote last April in regard to the resurgence of child labor in the United States:

A basic litmus test for whether a society is moving forward or backward is its treatment of the most vulnerable, including the youth. What emerges in the US, therefore, is a picture of a country moving rapidly in reverse, driven by a deep and intractable economic, political and social crisis.

Only the intervention of the working class mobilized on the basis of a socialist program can stem the descent into barbarism and forge a new social order based on ensuring the needs and well being of all mankind.



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