

Tyson to close Iowa plant, lay off 1,200, leaving devastation in local community

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25 March 2024

Work at Tyson? We want to hear from you: Fill out the form at the end to tell us about your working conditions and the job cuts. Comments will be published anonymously.

Earlier this month, Tyson Foods, the largest meat and poultry producer in the United States, announced the closure of its pork plant in Perry, Iowa, a small town on the outskirts of the state capital, Des Moines. The shutdown is expected to occur this summer and would result in the loss of over 1,200 jobs, representing an eighth of Perry's population of approximately 8,000.

In a perfunctory statement, a company spokesperson said, "After careful consideration, we have made the difficult decision to permanently close our Perry, Iowa, pork facility," in order to "optimize the efficiency of our operations to best serve our customers." The company has said it is encouraging workers to apply for jobs at other plants, all of which would be far away from Perry and would require workers to uproot their families, in the event they are even able to get a new position.

The closure would be a significant blow to the local economy and community, where Tyson has been a major employer, leaving a wake of devastation for workers and their families. According to the US Census Bureau, in 2022, 13.9 percent of the population lived in poverty.

The company has been carrying out an accelerating wave of job cuts, laying off 4,200 workers in 2023, more than all of the prior decade. Last year, the Arkansas-based conglomerate closed five chicken processing plants and two packaging facilities. Plants in Jacksonville, Florida, and Columbia, South Carolina, are also slated to close this year.

The layoffs at Tyson are part of a wider assault on jobs in the United States, with employers announcing 84,638 layoffs last month alone. This figure marks the highest number of layoffs for February since 2009, during the Great Recession, according to a new job report by Challenger, Gray & Christmas.

Driving this jobs bloodbath are desperate efforts by companies, with the support of the political establishment, to boost profits and depress the ability of workers to fight for

higher wages. Tyson's latest layoff announcements come despite reporting better-than-expected quarterly earnings last month. Net sales rose 0.4 percent to \$13.32 billion, exceeding estimates of \$13.27 billion, and overall adjusted earnings of 69 cents per share beat analysts' estimates of 41 cents.

Kim Reynolds, the Republican governor of Iowa, has stated she plans to meet with the soon-to-be laid-off workers. The arrival of Reynolds is akin to a butcher seeking to give reassurance to those in the slaughter line.

Reynolds is at the helm of deepening attacks on Iowa workers. In 2022, she signed a bill that slashed Iowa's maximum duration of unemployment benefits from 26 weeks to 16 weeks. It also lowered the threshold for what is considered "suitable work" in comparison to a worker's pay from their previous job. Before that bill went into effect, a worker was not required to accept a job offering less pay until after their fifth week of unemployment. The new bill, however, reduces that period to just one week.

Reynolds also signed into law a bill that turns back time by allowing for de facto child labor. File 542 grants the directors of the Iowa Department of Education and Iowa Workforce Development the authority to make exceptions, permitting 14- to 17-year-olds to work in jobs currently prohibited for minors. Such jobs include office and clerical work, such as operating office machines, cashiering and window trimming; cleanup work, including the use of vacuum cleaners and floor waxers; and grounds maintenance. They can also work with cars and trucks, as well as in freezers and meat coolers.

The Republican-led efforts in Iowa to turn the clock back to working conditions that prevailed in the early 20th or even 19th centuries are part of a broader ruling class assault on wages and working conditions, one which has the support of both major capitalist parties.

The Federal Reserve, with the support of the Biden administration, has continued to maintain elevated interest

rates with the aim of slowing economic activity and driving up unemployment, in the name of “fighting inflation.” Meanwhile, school districts under both Democrats and Republicans around the country are initiating massive budget cuts and escalating layoffs, as the end of COVID relief funds for public education approaches.

In Iowa, agricultural equipment maker John Deere also announced it was laying off 150 at its Des Moines Works plant in recent weeks, among the first major job cuts by the company since the 2021 strike.

At Tyson, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union has stood idly by, accepting the closure as an accomplished fact. UFCW Local 1155, whose members include the 1,276 Tyson workers soon to be laid off, has made clear it will not lift a finger to fight the closure.

Roger Kail, president of UFCW Local 1155, conveyed to the press, “They [the workers] feel like they got kind of screwed,” he remarked. “You buy a house, settle down in that town, and now they’re likely forced to sell. Imagine being 59 or 60, seriously.” Rather than mounting a struggle to mobilize workers across Tyson to fight and stop the job cuts, the union told local media that it was seeking to determine what severance, “if any,” might be granted by the company to workers.

The right-wing media has demagogically sought to capture and divert anger over the layoffs by scapegoating immigrants and asylum seekers. Fox News host Jesse Watters, along with his guest, Ohio Republican Senator J.D. Vance, attempted whip up nationalist and anti-immigrant sentiment over the closure, with Watters claiming Tyson was giving the “ax to American workers” while hiring “en masse illegal aliens.”

As an initial matter, such nationalist poison lyingly ignores the fact that many, if not most, of the workers facing the loss of their jobs in Perry are immigrants themselves.

More importantly, the provocations by the right-wing media are meant to distract workers from the real source of the attacks on their jobs: the corporations and capitalism itself. The notion that there is not enough money or jobs for everyone is a myth long propagated by right-wing and fascist tendencies—as well as the union bureaucracies—in their efforts to prevent workers from uniting on the basis of their common interests across all ethnic, racial and national lines.

Many of Tyson’s workers—immigrant and US-born alike—worked in plants during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the virus ripped through meat processing facilities and into the surrounding communities.

Today, it continues to infect workers, as the government and corporations have dropped what little remain of public health precautions.

As outbreaks occurred and protests by meatpacking workers broke out over unsafe conditions at the onset of the pandemic, the unions sought to quell these protests and get workers back into the plants. The unions acted as watchdogs for the meat plants, including Tyson, pushing the narrative of an impending food shortage to keep plants open as the pandemic spread.

Having worked through these dangerous conditions, and facing mounting safety hazards, workers are now being told they must accept the loss of their livelihoods.

The shutdown of the Perry plant can and must be stopped! To combat the layoffs, workers should band together and link up with their coworkers across different plants in the region and more broadly.

To coordinate this struggle, Perry workers should form rank-and-file committees to fight the job cuts. At Stellantis (maker of Jeep, Chrysler and Dodge vehicles), a group of temporary workers recently organized a rank-and-file committee in order to struggle against the growing mass firings at the company, which has terminated or laid off thousands since last year’s United Auto Workers strike.

Workers across the globe face a common enemy. Tyson, a global company employing some 139,000 people, can only be challenged by a united struggle of Tyson workers across state and national lines.

Solidarity actions to stop the job cuts should be prepared by workers at different plants and workplaces in Iowa, across the country, and globally. Moreover, the building of such committees requires a political perspective opposed to the nationalist divide-and-conquer strategies put forth by both capitalist parties, the Democratic and Republican Party.



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