

United Food & Commercial Workers union silent as

## Over 200 meat processing workers in Iowa face immediate deportation following revocation of work visas

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Over 200 workers at the Ottumwa, Iowa JBS pork processing plant are facing immediate deportation after the Trump administration, supported by the US Supreme Court, revoked temporary protected status for workers from Haiti, Cuba, Venezuela, Guatemala and Nicaragua earlier this year.

Throughout the US, over half a million Cubans, Haitians, Guatemalans and Nicaraguans who began arriving in the US in October 2022 are at risk of being detained and deported, following the termination of the CHNV (Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, Venezuela) parole program.

In comments to KCCI 8 out of Des Moines, United Food & Commercial Workers Local 1149 union President Roger Kail confirmed that between 210 and 220 workers at the plant were informed that their visas had been revoked and that JBS had fired them. Kail said it was the largest termination of worker visas during his 23 years in the union leadership.

In addition to the layoffs at JBS, another UFCW official confirmed to KCCI that the Hormel Turkey and Eggs plant (HTE) in Algona, Iowa is firing 12 workers following the termination of the CHNV and TPS (Temporary Protected Status) programs.

In a July 15 City Council meeting, Ottumwa Mayor Rick Johnson informed Council members that the company planned to fire the workers after their visas were revoked. In the same meeting, Johnson said he did not know if more workers in the plant would be affected in the near future.

As of 2024, roughly 24,000 people lived in Ottumwa, located in southeastern Iowa, making the JBS plant, which employs roughly 2,500 people, by far the largest employer in town.

In response to the visa revocations, the United Food & Commercial Workers, which has 1.2 million members in the US, many of whom are immigrants, has remained completely silent. As of this writing it has issued no statement on social media in opposition to the firings and attacks on immigrant workers, much less called for strike action to defend jobs and democratic rights.

This reporter reached out to the UFCW on social media and via email for comment on the recent firings and plans by the union to defend the workers from Trump's mass deportation operation. There has been no response.

Under conditions where the Trump administration is actively trying to overturn birthright citizenship and in which Trump himself has promised to go after the "home grown," the silence of the UFCW bureaucracy must be regarded as consent.

Many of the major trade union leaders have signaled support for Trump's "America First" nationalist agenda, including Shawn Fain of the United Auto Workers, Harold Daggett of the International Longshoremen's Association and Sean O'Brien of the Teamsters. Virtually the entire AFL-CIO bureaucracy backed Trump's pick for Secretary of Labor, Lori Chavez-DeRemer, who is now slashing workplace regulations.

Even though workers all over the US, both in and outside of the unions, have been targeted by Trump's fascistic border Gestapo, not a single union has called for a general strike to stop attacks on workers, many of whom have lived and worked in the US for years.

This shows that workers can only defend their democratic rights through a rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy. This means the building of rank-and-file committees to organize the defense of immigrant workers, as part of a broader movement of the working class against Trump, his Democratic Party enablers and the corporate oligarchy.

### Lessons from history: The 1985 Hormel strike

Their refusal to defend immigrants flows from the control of the trade unions by a nationalist, pro-capitalist bureaucracy which has spent decades imposing layoffs and pro-company concessions. The bureaucracy responded to the end of the

postwar boom, which made it impossible to reconcile support for capitalism with improving living standards for workers, by openly integrating itself with management and the capitalist state.

A key episode in this transformation was the pivotal Hormel strike carried out by workers beginning on August 17, 1985. On that date, 1,500 workers at the Hormel plant in Austin, Minnesota went on strike when the corporation demanded workers take a 23 percent pay cut. The strike was initiated by UFCW Local P-9 but was opposed by the UFCW national union, which had agreed to wage cuts across the industry.

In defiance of the UFCW bureaucracy, the Democratic Party and the corporation, workers at P-9 sent roving pickets to other Hormel plants, including the plant at Ottumwa, Iowa. In response, 750 workers at the Ottumwa plant joined the strike.

Momentum for the strike and workers' demands grew in February and March with large rallies in support of the striking meatworkers held in major American cities. At the same time, convoys delivering food and supplies to the striking workers were organized in Minnesota and Iowa.

In response, far from calling on its membership to join in the struggle, the UFCW withdrew all support for the strike and cut off benefits to striking workers. This was followed in April 1986 with court proceedings that sought to put Local P-9 under trusteeship.

A sympathetic judge ruled in favor of the national union, paving the way for Local P-9 leaders to be removed with strikebreakers enrolled into the union in their stead. In August 1986, the UFCW announced it had reached a deal with Hormel that provided the company with all of its demands, paving the way for the destruction of hundreds of jobs and eventually the sale of Hormel to Cargill, Excel, and then finally, JBS.

## **A super-exploited workforce**

Conditions for meatpacking workers, which had been on a rough parity with other factory workers, collapsed in the ensuing decades. Today, the median wage of meatpacking workers is only \$19.13 an hour, according to the most recent federal statistics.

In 2025, meat processing remains one of the most dangerous and deadliest jobs for workers in the United States. Workers are routinely exposed to sharp blades, slippery floors, hazardous chemicals and company-ordered speedup that induces not only psychological but physical trauma from repetitive motions. A recent lawsuit by a former JBS safety worker in Colorado alleges extensive harassment for attempting to bring safety violations to management's attention.

Some of the most horrible recent deaths in the meatpacking industry include the death of 22-year-old Tyson worker Casen

Garcia three years ago and the death this month in a meatgrinder of 19-year-old Guatemalan immigrant Brayan Neftali Otoniel Canu Joj. A large proportion of meatpacking workers today are immigrants, intimidated from speaking out against conditions by the constant threat of deportation.

Meanwhile, the assets and salaries controlled by the bureaucracy have boomed. The UFCW national headquarters controls over \$644 million in net assets, which is used to disburse salaries to the bureaucracy, 90 of whom make more than \$100,000 a year, according to Department of Labor records.

Contempt for workers' lives was expressed most clearly at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. All the major meat processors, such as JBS, Tyson and Cargill, lobbied the Trump administration and Congress to reclassify their employees as "essential" in order to keep them on the job even as the virus took hold in factories throughout the Midwest.

JBS facilities in Ottumwa, Iowa; Greeley, Colorado; and the JBS beef plant in Grand Island, Nebraska reported mass outbreaks in the spring and summer of 2020.

Data cited in a 2022 congressional report found that at least 269 meatpacking workers died in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, while over 59,000 workers were infected, no doubt a vast undercount.

The UFCW and other meatpacking unions actively collaborated in keeping plants open. In one infamous case, UFCW agreed to an "attendance bonus" at the Tyson pork plant in Waterloo, Iowa, even as management took bets on how many workers would be infected. At least six workers died of COVID-19 at the plant.

However, in some cases workers took matters into their own hands. A wildcat walkout at the JBS beef plant in Greeley, Colorado temporarily forced the plant to shut down in the summer of 2020.

This must be the example for today. The defense of immigrant workers, which is critical for the defense of the rights of the whole working class, is only possible through a fight by the rank and file to transfer power out of the hands of the bureaucracy and onto the shop floor, where it belongs.



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