

# Brutal Tyson Foods restructuring leaves nearly 5,000 jobless in Lexington, Nebraska and Amarillo, Texas

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In a brutal act of corporate restructuring, Tyson Foods laid off nearly 5,000 workers on January 20, announcing the closure of its Lexington, Nebraska, beef plant and a reduction to a single shift at its Amarillo, Texas, facility.

According to state Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification (WARN) notices, all 3,212 employees at the Lexington plant and 1,761 workers at Amarillo are losing their jobs. Management has described the moves as “right-sizing” after the company’s beef segment posted a large loss in fiscal year 2025. Framed as a business necessity, the decision will in fact be a social catastrophe for workers and entire communities.

The human and regional consequences are immediate and severe. Lexington is a town of roughly 11,000 people, and the plant’s closure will directly affect a large share of local employment, with ripple effects across housing, retail, services, and public revenues. A 2024 U.S. Census Bureau report shows that 10.9 percent of Nebraskans live below the poverty line. Food insecurity stands at 11.6 percent, according to [SpotlightOnPoverty.org](https://SpotlightOnPoverty.org), while the state minimum wage remains a meager \$9 an hour.

Modeling by the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and local estimates suggest total job losses in the regional economy could approach 7,000. Tyson workers alone stand to lose an estimated \$241 million in annual pay and benefits. Jason Douglas, CEO of the Lexington Regional Health Center, described the closure as a “spreadsheet decision,” warning that the community could be left with a hollowed-out, unusable facility. He pointed to the long and damaging aftermath of earlier shutdowns in the state, including job cuts by U.S. Cellular Corporation, layoffs at food safety firm Fortrex in Lexington, and reductions at Neenah Foundry in Lincoln and Eaton Corporation in Kearney.

These cuts follow the 2024 closure of the Tyson Foods pork plant in Perry, Iowa, outside Des Moines, with the loss of 1,200 jobs.

US beef processors are shedding jobs primarily because

there are far fewer cattle available to slaughter. Prolonged drought, sharply rising feed and input costs, pandemic-related supply chain shocks, and ongoing threats from pests and animal disease have driven cattle inventories to decades-low levels. As a result, procurement costs have surged, margins have been squeezed, and facilities built for much higher volumes are operating far below their intended scale. Rather than absorb these costs, companies have responded by closing plants, cutting shifts, and consolidating operations to better match output with reduced livestock supply.

## Worker safety compromised

This relentless pursuit of profit has also contributed to higher rates of workplace injury and death. Conditions worsened sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic, when meatpacking was declared an essential industry, forcing workers to remain on the job even as illness and fatalities mounted.

Tens of thousands of workers were infected and hundreds died, further reducing the available workforce and delaying recovery. According to the Food Environment Reporting Network by November 2020, 235 meatpacking workers had died from COVID and 49,000 tested positive.

Overall workplace safety suffered. One horrific instance was the death of 22-year-old Casen Garcia, who died in July 2022 while working in extremely dangerous conditions in the rendering basement at the Tyson Foods meatpacking plant in Joslin, Illinois.

The consequences extended far beyond the plants, affecting families and entire regions.

A 2022 review published by the National Library of Medicine detailed the impact on labor and operations. By late April 2020, US meat-processing output had fallen by

roughly 25 percent compared with pre-pandemic levels as facilities slowed or shut down due to outbreaks and restrictions. In some plants, line speeds were cut by as much as 45 percent, nearly halving daily production.

Epidemiological shock, concentrated production, and high-speed, automated lines combined to produce a sudden collapse in throughput.

Meat prices swung wildly at the onset of the pandemic, as slaughterhouses slowed and demand shifted abruptly from restaurants to grocery stores. Comparisons between March–April 2020 and February 2020 show dramatic price changes across product lines. Retail beef cuts rose by about 39 percent, while primal beef values fell roughly 42 percent, reflecting the collapse of food-service demand. Fresh beef prices climbed about 26 percent by May–June 2020, pork nearly 18 percent, and chicken about 10 percent. In some cases, ground beef prices briefly spiked by close to 100 percent.

In the years since, prices have remained well above prepandemic levels. Data from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis indicate that retail prices for 100 percent ground beef rose from roughly \$3.88 per pound in December 2019 to about \$6.32–\$6.69 per pound in 2025—an increase of roughly 45 percent.

Although the meatpacking industry has expanded slaughter capacity over the past decade, fewer cattle are actually being processed. According to Cattle Buyers Weekly, the USDA, and Grier Estimations, national slaughter capacity increased from about 33.2 million head in 2015 to just under 35 million by 2024–2025, while actual slaughter failed to keep pace.

From 2015 to 2019, utilization rose from 86 percent to 98 percent, reflecting a tight balance between herd size and plant capacity. That alignment broke down in 2020, when utilization slipped to 94 percent. After a brief rebound in 2021–2022, usage declined more sharply from 2023 onward. By 2024, slaughter fell to roughly 31.5 million head, or 90 percent of capacity, with forecasts for 2025 dropping to about 29.5 million head—just 87 percent of available capacity.

## Public health and food safety under strain

At the same time, public health protections are being weakened. Budget cuts and deregulation have reduced surveillance, enforcement, and staffing at agencies responsible for food and animal health. These trends have increased the risk of foodborne illnesses, including listeria,

salmonella and yersinia.

The closure of processing facilities and the erosion of already inadequate federal oversight—combined with the approval of so-called “forever chemicals” under the Trump administration—have left the food system more fragile, placing both workers and consumers at greater risk.

In a press release titled “*Lawsuit Challenges Trump EPA’s Latest Approval of ‘Forever Chemical’ Pesticide*,” the Center for Biological Diversity reported that the EPA found one such chemical, isocycloseram, reduced testicle size, lowered sperm counts and harmed the liver in manufacturer-sponsored animal studies. Australian regulators also found skeletal malformations in fetal rats, a conclusion rejected by the EPA. Additional evidence suggests the chemical may pose a cancer risk.

In response to mass layoffs and the broader assault on public health, the United Food and Commercial Workers union has taken no action. It has neither called strikes nor organized coordinated mobilizations against the destruction of livelihoods. This inaction reflects the deep integration of union bureaucracies into corporate management and the state, where concessions are routinely accepted at workers’ expense.

The Tyson layoffs are part of a broader, global assault on jobs, democratic rights, and living standards. In the United States, this offensive finds one of its sharpest expressions in the policies of the Trump administration, which has encountered no serious opposition from the Democratic Party.

What is needed is the construction of democratic, rank-and-file led organizations and a political strategy that links workplace struggles to wider social demands. Immediate steps include forming independent shop-floor committees, holding fully democratic meetings, and organizing opposition to restructuring plans outside the control of pro-corporate union officials. These committees must build solidarity across plants and communities, coordinating strikes, pickets, mutual aid and broader campaigns to defend jobs and living standards.



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