

Colorado meatpacking workers authorize strike over horrific plant conditions despite deportation threat

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Workers at the JBS meatpacking plant in Greeley, Colorado, the third largest beef plant in the US, voted 99 percent in favor of strike action this past week. The largely immigrant workforce endures extremely hazardous conditions for extremely low pay, with the constant threat of deportation by ICE agents.

At the beginning of the month, many of the immigrant workforce were scheduled to lose Temporary Protected Status (TPS), at the direction of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, before a US District Court judge paused the termination on February 2. Many of the workers reported the presence of unmarked vans driving around voting sites which they believed contained ICE agents.

By voting in favor of strike action, the JBS workers are taking a highly courageous stand and joining a growing wave of resistance to both the international jobs bloodbath currently underway along with the Trump administration's plans for war and dictatorship.

The final decision to strike is anticipated to take place on February 20, the one day JBS is willing to negotiate a new contract, according to union officials. The last contract for the UFCW workers expired in July, although the union and the company extended the contract. Should an agreement not be reached, the union could elect to end the extension with seven days' notice, meaning that the workers could begin striking on February 27 under these terms.

In language intended to mask a sellout in the works, however, UFCW Local 7 President and Vice President of UFCW International Kim Cordova stated that "If JBS does not return to the bargaining table and they don't resolve the unfair labor practices, then we will pull the extension." Only last summer, Local 7 betrayed

a powerful strike by Colorado grocery workers at both the Safeway and King Soopers chains, crafting concessionary agreements behind the backs of picketers.

Should workers press forward with the JBS strike, it would be the first in the plant's history and also the first major strike of meatpacking workers since the 1985-86 Hormel strike in Minnesota. That struggle, like the PATCO and Phelps Dodge strikes the same decade, was a milestone in the conversion of the trade unions into instruments of corporate management. The UFCW cut off benefits to the striking Hormel workers and replaced the local P-9 union with a scab local in order to ratify a sellout agreement.

Conditions at the plants have only steadily eroded since.

Even with injuries and deaths common in US factories, the JBS Greeley plant itself stands out as a particularly notorious example.

In 2020, at least six workers at the plant died from COVID-19, with management refusing to shut the plant down. The first Trump administration had issued an executive order to keep meat processing plants open despite rampaging infections and deaths. JBS then rejected hundreds of workers' compensation claims despite numerous fatalities and cases of Long COVID.

Since then, workers have regularly sustained severe injuries at the plant, including lost limbs and even deaths, as the company imposes longer hours with fewer breaks. Whenever workers would complain about such harsh conditions, the company retaliated severely, with the UFCW doing nothing to defend either union or non-union plant workers.

The strike vote also follows a class action lawsuit

filed against JBS in December. The suit alleges that the workers, especially those migrating from Haiti, were hired under false pretenses. Workers were lured to immigrate to the US in late 2023 via social media with promises of steady, good-paying work and free housing. Instead, they were forced to cram into small motel rooms without heat in the winter time, while working long hours on the processing line, and were denied food and bathroom breaks.

The workers hired from Haiti were assigned the “B” shift at night, which processes around 440 head of cattle per hour versus the usual 390 head processed in the daytime “A” shift, itself an obscenely fast speed. Workers on the B shift were not only unable to take adequate breaks, but weren’t able to even pause and collect themselves for a second or two on the line as they were forced to cut beef non-stop.

Many found themselves no longer able to fully extend or close their fingers as they had to tightly grasp hooks and knives throughout the entirety of their shifts, which officially last 8.5 hours but which are commonly longer to accommodate production quotas. The denial of even bathroom breaks sometimes led to instances of workers soiling themselves on the line.

JBS also paid a \$5.5 million settlement in 2021 for discriminating against Muslim employees at the Greeley plant by denying them breaks for prayer. The company also turned off water fountains during the month of Ramadan so that the employees could not drink water while fasting. The company also knowingly hired a vendor that utilized child labor, Packer Sanitation Services, putting minors at risk of working at a plant filled with lethal blades and hazardous chemicals.

Prior to the strike vote, JBS workers had independently begun short work stoppages to protest these conditions. The assembly line workers would coordinate these actions by banging their meat hooks on the sides of work stations, letting beef slide past on conveyor belts until supervisors either slowed down or stopped the belts entirely.

These actions compelled the UFCW bureaucracy to hold a strike vote. Tchelly Moise, a representative of UFCW Local 7, told reporters with *Mother Jones* simply that, “People at the plant, they’re pissed off.”

JBS workers in Colorado earn between \$17 and \$25 per hour, which means that the meat processing

workers cannot afford the area’s cost of living. The company’s latest proposal includes a mere 90 cent wage increase along with a pension plan that it knows workers will not last long enough to vest, given the extremely hazardous conditions present in the plant and deportation threats for the immigrant workforce.

This is despite the company’s beef division having made record revenues in the third quarter of 2025 of \$7.2 billion with a net profit that same quarter of \$644.1 million. The company is a major supporter of the Trump administration, donating \$5 million to his second-term inaugural committee.

While workers are determined, the UFCW bureaucrats will do everything they can to limit the struggle. The union is filled with officials who make a line worker’s income several times over, including Local 7 president Kim Cordova, who made nearly \$250,000 in 2025. Infamously, the UFCW allowed the meatpacking industry to operate even during the initial COVID shutdowns in 2020. In Waterloo, Iowa, the union even worked out an “attendance bonus” at a plant, where managers ran a betting pool on how many workers would get infected.

JBS workers should be prepared to combat this initiative by organizing to ensure democratic, rank-and-file control over the strike. This means the formation of rank-and-file strike committees that give workers the ability to prevent any attempt to prevent or shut down a strike until their demands are met. Workers must also organize to protect themselves from potential ICE raids and appeal for support from workers across Colorado and the US.



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