

Colorado workers to strike Monday in largest US meatpacking work stoppage in 40 years

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Workers at the JBS meatpacking plant in Greeley, Colorado will begin a strike on Monday, March 16 after voting more than 99 percent in favor of strike action early last month.

The strike will be the first in the plant's history involving some 3,800 workers. It would also be the largest strike of US meatpacking workers since the bitter 1985-86 Hormel strike in Minnesota, which ended in betrayal when the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) intervened to decertify local P-9.

But today, the Greeley workers join a major upsurge of the class struggle in the US and internationally, including nurses in New York City, California and Michigan, along with teachers and education workers throughout the US, including 30,000 Los Angeles school workers who voted overwhelmingly to strike last month and 48,000 University of California student employees who did the same.

These workers are fighting against abysmal working conditions including low pay and disappearing benefits coupled with severe under-staffing. JBS workers themselves face poverty-level wages of \$17 to \$25 per hour with the company only proposing a meager 90 cent per hour wage increase in the latest round of negotiations. The company made \$644.1 million in net profits in the third quarter of 2025 alone, and yet refuses to provide workers with decent wages and safe working conditions.

For meatpacking workers, hazardous and life-threatening conditions have become the workplace norm.

The Greeley plant was infamous at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic after six workers there died from infection. The company rejected hundreds of compensation claims from workers who became sick

with the virus while in the plant.

In March of 2021, a worker died in the plant after falling into a vat of toxic chemicals. Workers run the risk every day of cuts and repetitive motion injuries as a result of dangerously fast line speeds. Haitian immigrant workers on the "B" shift at the plant work at speeds of 440 head of cattle per hour, nearly 100 head greater than the recommended safe speed.

In order to maintain such unsafe speeds, workers were often denied food and bathroom breaks, and, as most were immigrants, rarely spoke out for fear of being fired and deported.

Nonetheless, the workers recently began organizing spontaneous work stoppages, shutting the lines until they were brought back down to safer speeds.

Workers at the Swift plant are primarily immigrant laborers, many of whom were lured there by unscrupulous recruiters peddling false promises of high pay and US citizenship. ICE agents and border patrol regularly menace the workers, with several reporting that unmarked ICE vans were present when the workers took their initial strike vote last month.

The immense courage shown by JBS workers contrasted sharply with the UFCW bureaucracy, which is in bed with management. During the initial stages of the pandemic, UFCW Local 7 in Greeley strained to keep the JBS workers on the job in the face of spontaneous walkouts in the summer of 2020. Also that year, another UFCW local even worked out attendance bonuses with management at a Tyson pork plant in Waterloo, Iowa, who were privately taking bets on how many workers would get infected.

Although the strike will meet with immense support, there is every indication that the bureaucracy will attempt to isolate the upcoming strike as much as possible. To counter this, meatpacking workers must

assert democratic control over their own struggle with a rank-and-file strike committee.

Through a committee composed exclusively of workers and excluding union officials, they can fight to enforce transparency and control over collective bargaining and fan out for support across the state of Colorado and among meatpacking workers nationwide.

A critical question will be to prevent JBS from diverting production to other beef processing plants. This has already begun: the company is diverting livestock to a facility in Cactus, Texas. UFCW Local 540 in Cactus is essentially making its workers scab on their brothers and sisters in Colorado, with the local not even mentioning the Greeley strike on its web page or social media.

Workers should appeal to their brothers and sisters in Texas and at other plants to refuse to work on cattle diverted from Greeley.

UFCW officials also reached an agreement in January with Tyson Foods at the latter's plant in Dakota City, Nebraska. Workers there had voted 98 percent to authorize a strike last June after a fatal workplace accident led to an insulting OSHA fine of \$27,790. Nonetheless, the union ultimately ignored the strike vote, reaching an agreement with the company for a mere \$1.55 per hour wage increase.

In February, the UFCW and Cargill reached an agreement at the Watson packing plant in Ontario, Canada. The facility was part of a powerful strike in 2024 of Canadian Cargill meatpacking workers which paralyzed beef plants across eastern Canada. Cargill workers had decisively rejected a settlement offer supported by UFCW officials.

But this time, the UFCW bureaucrats moved quickly to reach an agreement with Cargill before even conducting a strike authorization vote.

As for UFCW Local 7, which covers a wide swath of territory from Colorado to Wyoming, the union has worked to shut down and isolate one strike after another. In July of last year, Local 7 shut down a powerful three-week long strike of grocery workers at the Safeway chain.

A subsequent strike by 10,000 King Soopers grocery workers ended with a 100-day "labor peace" agreement that members never voted on.

There is no lack of bravery and commitment among the Greeley meatpacking workers, but workers must be

prepared to deal with the inevitable sellout attempts by the union bureaucracy.

The fact that the workforce is largely immigrant means that the struggle also must be prepared to face down attempts to break the strike with ICE raids and threats of deportation. In Colorado, ICE's Aurora Contract Detention Facility is quickly gaining notoriety for its inhumane treatment of immigrant workers. A new ICE facility also planned in Weld County, in the northern part of the state, is part of plans to expand the activities of Trump's immigration gestapo.

Through rank-and-file committees, workers can share information and react quickly if ICE attempts to intervene in the strike. Greeley workers should also reach out to workers across the region, both immigrant and "native-born," for mutual support against police attacks.

For information on forming or joining a rank and file committee, workers are encouraged to visit the following site.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact