

Immigrant workers launch strike at JBS meatpacking plant in Greeley, Colorado

Tom Hall

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On Monday, 3,800 workers are set to strike at the JBS beef processing plant in Greeley, Colorado. The walkout would be the largest strike in the US meatpacking industry since the bitter 1985–1986 Hormel strike.

The strike is another sign of the rising class struggle in the United States. The year began with lengthy strikes by tens of thousands of nurses in New York City and on the West Coast. Educators in San Francisco have also carried out strike action, with educators in Los Angeles and other major districts voting to authorize strikes. The Greeley strike would also be the first major strike to begin since the start of the war against Iran, a massively unpopular conflict whose costs are already being imposed on the working class through price increases and austerity.

At the Greeley plant, between 80 and 90 percent of workers are immigrants, with the largest numbers coming from Haiti and Somalia. Fifty-seven different languages are spoken inside the plant, making it a truly international workforce.

The strike is doubly courageous given the rampage by the Trump administration against immigrants. According to the union, unmarked vans were parked outside the venue where the strike vote was held, raising concerns that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was conducting surveillance. An investigation by the *Colorado Times Recorder* uncovered nine secret detention facilities across the state.

The Trump administration is also attempting to revoke Temporary Protected Status for as many as 500,000 Haitian workers. Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, subjected to more than two centuries of imperialist oppression and repeated foreign interventions.

The assault on immigrants by Trump is an expansion of the deportation regime built up under both corporate-controlled parties. The Obama administration set records for deportations during its two terms, while the Biden administration deported 4.6 million people during its four years in office.

It is not uncommon for management to retaliate against workers by tipping off immigration authorities. An infamous raid on poultry plants in Mississippi in 2019 led to 680 arrests, including of workers who had recently won a legal settlement against management over harassment and abuse. More than 350 were deported. One worker was later killed in Mexico while attempting to reunite with his family after deportation.

A recent lawsuit has also accused JBS of human trafficking at Greeley. Haitian workers say they were lured to the United States

through TikTok advertisements promising stable jobs and housing. When they arrived, many found themselves crammed into overcrowded conditions, with as many as 11 people to a room and between 40 and 60 workers living in a five-bedroom house without electricity or running water.

Workers across the country, regardless of legal status, race or nationality, have an obligation to support the strike. The same is true for workers internationally. JBS is a Brazilian multinational corporation that operates roughly 250 meatpacking plants in 25 countries, making the struggle of Greeley workers part of a global fight.

Last year, a national contract covering roughly 26,000 JBS workers at 14 facilities across the United States was ratified with the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW). However, the Greeley plant was excluded from that agreement, and workers there have been working under a contract extension since last summer.

“The strike by workers at the JBS plant in Greeley is an important development and must be supported by workers everywhere,” Will Lehman, a socialist running for president of the United Auto Workers on a platform of abolishing the union bureaucracy, said in a statement issued in response to the strike. “These workers are standing up against a giant multinational corporation and against terrible conditions that have been imposed for years.”

“The ruling class and the politicians want to divide workers by nationality and immigration status. This is a lie. Immigrant workers are not our enemies. They are our brothers and sisters, fighting the same exploitative corporations and facing the same attacks.

“I call on autoworkers across the country to support the JBS workers. The UAW bureaucracy, which has lined up with Trump and nationalist policies, tries to claim that foreign workers are our ‘competition.’ That is a fraud meant to divide us. The principle that must guide workers everywhere is the old and powerful one: an injury to one is an injury to all.

“The workers in Greeley have already shown their determination. In 2020, they organized walkouts and sickouts against being forced to work during the COVID-19 pandemic. They were fighting not only JBS management but the first Trump administration, which invoked the Defense Production Act to keep meatpacking plants operating even as workers were getting sick and dying.

“Today, with the war against Iran spiraling out of control, similar methods will be used again to force workers to continue producing under dangerous conditions. Workers must prepare to resist these measures.”

Workers fight poverty pay, deadly conditions

Workers at the Greeley plant face atrocious conditions. Starting pay is roughly \$22 an hour, barely above Colorado’s state minimum wage of \$15.16 and barely half the living wage of \$43.30 needed for a Greeley household with two adults and two children, according to MIT’s Living Wage Calculator.

JBS has responded to workers’ demands with a provocative wage proposal of just 60 cents in the first year and 30 cents in each of the following two years.

At least six workers at the Greeley plant died of COVID-19 during the first year of the pandemic in 2020. Meatpacking plants became major superspreader sites, particularly in rural areas where they often serve as major employers. According to Food and Environment Reporting Network data, at least 59,000 workers in meatpacking plants were infected and 298 died by the fall of 2021.

Greeley was a center of resistance. Workers organized spontaneous walkouts during the spring and summer of 2020 to protest unsafe conditions. But UFCW Local 7 eventually intervened to instruct workers to remain on the job.

In 2021, another worker at the Greeley plant died after falling into a chemical vat. The conditions evoke the scenes described in Upton Sinclair’s novel *The Jungle*, which exposed the brutal exploitation of immigrant workers in Chicago’s meatpacking plants in the early twentieth century.

Other recent deaths underscore the broader crisis. Last summer, a 19-year-old Guatemalan immigrant Brayan Neftali Otoniel Canu Joj died after falling into a meat grinder at a food processing plant in California. Outside the meatpacking industry, two postal workers died at distribution centers late last year, while autoworker Ronald Adams Sr. was killed on the job in a case now the subject of an independent investigation by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

The brutal pace of production is another central issue. Workers report that line speeds have been increased from roughly 390 cattle per hour to between 420 and 440 per hour. Key equipment such as knife sharpeners have reportedly been broken for weeks. The speedup, combined with understaffing, creates extremely dangerous conditions and contributes to cuts, repetitive motion injuries and other ailments that already make meatpacking one of the most injury-prone industries in the United States.

Attempts by UFCW officials to isolate strike

While workers at Greeley are determined to fight, they face an

obstacle in the UFCW bureaucracy, which will systematically try to isolate and undermine the strike.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the union assisted corporations and the government in keeping meatpacking plants open even as workers were becoming infected in large numbers. One of the most infamous cases occurred at the Tyson plant in Waterloo, Iowa, where management organized a betting pool among supervisors over how many workers would become infected, even as the union collaborated in keeping the plant operating.

UFCW Local 7 has a long history of isolating struggles by its members. Last year, grocery workers at King Soopers and Safeway in Colorado struck, but the UFCW did everything to keep these struggles from uniting. The union shut down the King Soopers strike in February with a 100-day “labor peace” agreement that ensured workers would not be on strike at the same time as Safeway workers. Safeway employees eventually struck on their own for three weeks during the summer.

These actions formed part of a nationwide pattern of sabotage. Roughly 100,000 grocery workers had contracts expiring last summer, placing them in an extremely powerful position to fight for major gains after decades of poverty wages and the spread of casual labor. Yet only a handful of workers went on strike at isolated chains in individual states.

In this context, the fact that Greeley workers are outside the national JBS contract creates a serious danger that their struggle will be isolated. This must not be allowed to happen.

“The mass protests in Minneapolis against ICE violence shows the broad support for immigrant rights,” Will Lehman’s statement concluded. “But this movement must be grounded in the working class. Workers at other JBS plants, meatpacking workers across the United States and workers in other industries must be prepared to take action in defense of their brothers and sisters in Greeley. If there are signs that raids or other forms of repression are being prepared, workers across the country must respond immediately with mass action.

“The key question is the development of rank-and-file committees to expand this struggle. These committees must prepare collective action and ensure that the struggle is expanded, not isolated.

“The UFCW bureaucracy plays the same role as the bureaucracy in the UAW and the other unions in undermining our collective power. It has already undermined the position of Greeley workers by keeping them separated from the national JBS contract. Workers must overcome this isolation by uniting from below. Rank-and-file committees can also enforce democratic oversight over negotiations and ensure that any contract ends the strike only after workers win real improvements in wages, safety and conditions.”



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