

“We cannot continue to be worked like slaves”: Colorado meatpacking workers strike at JBS plant

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Over 1,000 meatpacking workers at the massive JBS meat processing plant in Greeley, Colorado braved freezing temperatures to picket for hours early Monday morning. They were among the 3,800 workers who launched a strike yesterday, the largest in the industry since the Hormel strike in 1985-86.

Workers at the plant are in the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 7. The local has 23,000 members across Colorado and Wyoming in the food processing, grocery, retail and manufacturing industries. Union officials tried to meet with company representatives on Saturday to avert a strike but their entreaties were rejected.

The strike takes place amid an upsurge in strike and mass protest activity in the United States. At the start of the year, thousands of healthcare workers in California, Hawaii and New York City struck for weeks, while tens of thousands of Minnesota residents participated in mass protests on January 23 and 30 in opposition to the federal occupation of the state by ICE.

The strike at Greeley is all the more significant because the overwhelming majority of the workforce are immigrants, who have launched the strike in defiance of the broader rampage by immigration authorities. It is also the first major strike to begin since the launching of the illegal and unpopular war with Iran. It anticipates a broader conflict pitting the working class against the Trump administration and the corporate oligarchy it defends.

The mood at Monday’s picket was determined. Workers walked up and down the street and in front of the plant as passersby honked their horns and waved in support.

Chris said one of the reasons he, along with 99

percent of the workers, voted to strike was because of faulty equipment. “And a lot of the management, supervisors, are kind of abusive when it comes to restroom breaks.”

Chris explained that workers were allowed two breaks and a lunch, but that management doesn’t “like to give us our breaks.” He said some supervisors will make workers wait 30 minutes before allowing them to go to the bathroom.

He added that “it’s true” that some workers have been forced to soil themselves on the line because supervisors would not permit them to go to the bathroom. “I’ve actually seen workers wet themselves.”

On the dangerous working conditions meatpacking workers face, Chris recalled that a week before the strike, “somebody forgot to install a shut-off valve on one of the conveyor belts, which is basically a valve that turns the water on and off. One of the maintenance guys actually went up there and tried to fix it and he ended up falling down on his back, hitting his back against one of the upstands.”

Chris said he spends a lot of time at work on the conveyor belt removing objects that would otherwise end up in the meat product. “There’s some really, really weird stuff that goes down there.” He recalled pulling out hooks, broken pieces of the conveyor belt and pieces of wood.

On the Greeley picket line, several workers raised the fact that the company has begun charging workers for any personal protective equipment that needs to be replaced. Chris recalled having his hat stolen from his locker and then being forced to pay \$17 for a replacement. Sometimes the equipment does not get

replaced even if it is clearly broken.

“Personally,” Chris said, “I’ve asked the superintendents to actually replace some of my busted or damaged equipment. They actually refused to.” He referred to a mesh glove that he wears to protect his hands from knives and hooks which is missing a large piece off the back. “I asked the superintendent if I could have it replaced and he told me, ‘no.’”

Asked about the effects on the body from laboring in the plant, Chris took off one of his gloves and showed WSWs reporters his hand, swollen and scarred from years on the line, the skin darkened by the work that never quite washes off.

The Greeley plant was originally built in 1960 by the company Monfort of Colorado. It later became part of Swift & Company before the Brazilian multinational JBS acquired Swift and its assets, including the plant, in 2007. The plant is not only one of the largest beef-processing plants in the United States but also among the older surviving plants from the industry’s shift to massive rural packinghouses near the western feedlots.

Speaking on the decrepit state of the plant, Chris added, “Last week one of the conveyor belts broke down and five pieces of the conveyor belt actually went down the belt.” Chris said he has complained to supervisors about the state of the facility and the treatment of workers within it. “They just ignore it most of the time. Even the safety supervisor, she actually harasses me when I take my three breaks.”

Asked by WSWs reporters how the local union officials react when safety or other issues are raised, Chris said, “Some union reps help, others just ignore it. I’ve had some of them do that, they just look at it and then walk away.”

Chris recalled working at the plant in 2020 when COVID-19 swept through the facility, infecting hundreds of workers and killing at least six. “They actually put up a memorial to the workers a while ago,” he recalled.

Edison told the WSWs he was striking because “we need that pay increase to try to keep up with everything else ballooning out of proportion.” He noted that workers at the plant often process 2,600 head of cattle per shift.

Asked what he thought about the illegal war on Iran, Edison replied, “I think this whole war on Iran is just another massive Epstein cover-up.”

Kenny, a younger immigrant worker, told the WSWs he has been working at the plant since January 2026. “I started at \$23 but night shift makes \$24. If you are a driver you make \$26-something.”

Asked if that was enough of a salary to survive in Greeley, Kenny replied, “No, we need \$33 an hour.”

In order to undermine the struggle, the company has begun diverting product to the Cactus, Texas JBS plant. Workers at that plant are members of UFCW Local 540. Asked if he would support workers at the Cactus plant striking alongside them and refuse to handle scab cattle, Kenny replied enthusiastically, “Yes they have to go on strike because we need money.”

Kenny said he had heard about workers being forced to live in a hotel near the plant. “They make them come in, sleeping bad, people were talking about this a long time ago. Now many live in apartments, some live three to a bedroom.” This is likely a reference to Haitian workers who have filed a lawsuit alleging they were lured to the country with JBS’s promises of pay and housing, only to be stuffed 11 to a room or dozens living in homes without electricity or running water.

Asked by WSWs reporters if Kenny had seen any Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents harassing or intimidating workers at the plant, he added defiantly, “They can’t do that. If they do that, we are not accepting any of that.”

In conclusion Kenny said that this struggle was “not only about JBS, every worker needs to be paid good money. We cannot continue to be worked like slaves.”



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