

Organize the working class to support the JBS meatpacking strike!

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While the war in Iran and attacks on democratic rights at home show an American ruling class plumbing the depths of barbarism, a different and progressive movement is emerging within the working class. This is demonstrated in the strike of 3,800 meatpacking workers at the JBS plant in Greeley, Colorado.

Roughly 1,000 workers, who are part of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), have formed picket lines stretching for nearly half a mile along the perimeter of the facility. In a country where strikes have for years been suffocated by a union bureaucracy that limits picketing to a handful of individuals at each entrance, these mass picket lines testify to a profound shift in attitude. New moods are opening up. As one worker explained, “We cannot continue to be worked like slaves.”

The JBS workers embody the international character of the working class. At the Greeley plant, between 80 and 90 percent of workers are immigrants, and more than 50 languages are spoken inside the facility. JBS itself is a Brazilian-based multinational and one of the largest food companies in the world, with operations spanning six continents. It employs between 270,000 and 280,000 workers worldwide—approximately 158,000 in Brazil, 80,000 in North America, 16,800 in Europe and 14,000 in Australia, with additional facilities in Argentina, Canada and beyond.

The billionaire Batista family in Brazil holds a controlling share, but significant ownership stakes are held by major institutional investors, including the giant private equity firms BlackRock and Vanguard, an expression of the fact that the company’s ultimate master is the global financial oligarchy.

The strike is a direct rebuke to Donald Trump and to the union bureaucrats who have long sought to pit immigrant and “foreign” workers against “American” workers. In reality, immigrant workers are an essential component of

the American working class, just as American workers are part of the global working class.

Workers have taken a determined stand in defiance of the ever-present threat posed by Trump’s immigration police apparatus. Many of the workers are Haitian immigrants whom the administration is attempting to strip of Temporary Protected Status. Workers report that unmarked vans were stationed around the location of the strike vote, and recent reports indicate that Immigration and Customs Enforcement is operating at least nine secret detention sites in Colorado alone. Meatpacking and food processing facilities have long been targets of immigration raids, including one carried out at Greeley in 2006.

The conditions against which workers are fighting are horrific, recalling the worst abuses of the late 19th century. Haitian immigrants have filed lawsuits against the company, charging that they were lured to the United States with promises of stable employment and housing, only to be crammed by the dozens into houses without running water or electricity. At least six workers died during the first year of the pandemic, and in 2021 a worker died after falling into a chemical vat.

These conditions recall those described in Upton Sinclair’s 1906 novel *The Jungle*. But while President Theodore Roosevelt responded to the public outcry by enacting food safety legislation the following year, Trump invoked the Defense Production Act in 2020 to force meatpacking workers to remain on the job during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The reversion to barbaric conditions in the meatpacking industry is the product of a decades-long process in which the union bureaucracy has played a central role. A decisive turning point was the UFCW’s suppression of the Hormel strike in 1985–86. When Local P-9 in Austin, Minnesota, sought to break out of its isolation and appeal for broader support, it was decertified by the international

union.

The UFCW is one of countless unions whose bureaucracies collaborated with corporations to keep operations running during the pandemic. In Waterloo, Iowa, managers notoriously took bets on how many workers would become infected, with the complicity of the union apparatus.

At Greeley, UFCW Local 7 responded to spontaneous walkouts by instructing workers to remain on the job. Last year, the UFCW reached a national agreement with JBS covering 26,000 workers, but the Greeley plant was deliberately excluded and kept on a contract extension until just before the present strike—a maneuver that has facilitated the transfer of cattle to other facilities, including Canyon, Texas.

The UFCW has also declared that the strike will last only two weeks, with an option to extend it if the company does not return to negotiations. This is a clear signal that is planning on quickly shutting the strike down.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) urges workers to prepare not only for confrontation with management and capitalist politicians but also with the union bureaucracies, which function as extensions of both corporate management and the state.

The first and most urgent task is to take control of this strike out of the hands of the UFCW apparatus. The IWA-RFC urges workers to form a rank-and-file strike committee, democratically elected from the shop floor and the picket lines, to organize the struggle, communicate directly with workers, and prevent any backroom deal. This committee should draw up and publicize a set of non-negotiable demands based on what workers actually need—substantial wage increases and COLA, safe staffing and line speeds, real health protections, an end to victimizations and retaliation and full protection for immigrant workers.

Workers should reject any attempt to shut down the strike on the basis of vague promises that the company will “return to the negotiating table.” JBS has “returned” to the table countless times only to drag out talks, wear workers down and impose concessions. Workers should reject the UFCW’s self-imposed two-week limit, which is designed to demoralize workers and prepare a retreat.

However courageous their struggle, the workers in Greeley cannot prevail on their own against a massive multinational corporation, backed by the fascistic Trump administration.

The IWA-RFC urges striking workers to appeal directly to workers at every JBS facility in the United States—especially Canyon, Texas and other plants receiving diverted cattle—to refuse to handle strikebreaking shipments and to prepare solidarity action. Reach out to autoworkers, teachers, healthcare workers, logistics and rail workers and other sections of the working class facing the same assault on wages, conditions and democratic rights.

Build lines of communication and coordinate actions independent of the union bureaucracy, which will try to keep every struggle separated and contained.

In particular, preparations must be made for concrete actions to defend workers against attacks on the picket lines or retaliation by ICE. Coordinated actions, including strike action, must be organized to defend workers against the state, which will inevitably act in concert with corporate management.

Most importantly, the fight must be taken to the global level. JBS is a multinational corporation with a single global workforce. Workers at JBS facilities in Brazil, Europe, Australia and Canada should be mobilized in coordinated solidarity with the Greeley strikers. The conditions these workers face differ in their legal and political form but share a common economic foundation: the subordination of human life to profit.

The nationalist poison of “America First” and its equivalents in other countries must be rejected in favor of the principle that has animated working class struggles since the 19th century: “Workers of the World, Unite!”

The path forward is international solidarity and rank-and-file control—building an organized counteroffensive of the working class against JBS, the financial oligarchy behind it, and the political forces that will be mobilized to break this strike.



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