

# “People have died working this job”: JBS workers denounce unsafe conditions as strike enters third day

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18 March 2026

The largest meatpackers’ strike in the United States since the 1950s entered its third day on Wednesday. As with the previous two days, thousands of workers, a majority of whom are immigrants, picketed for hours outside the JBS meat processing facility in Greeley, Colorado.

JBS, a Brazil-based multinational, is the largest meatpacking corporation in the world. Workers at the Greeley plant have been laboring without a contract for over eight months after the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) ratified a national agreement covering roughly 26,000 workers at 14 facilities—excluding Greeley.

On Tuesday afternoon, reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* visited the afternoon picket, which was even larger than the morning picket. Some 2,000 workers picketed in front of and near the factory. Workers from Haiti, who face threats of deportation after the Trump administration moved to revoke Temporary Protected Status from them, defiantly chanted “nou kare!” Creole for “we are holding firm/steady.”

In an extended interview, Jaden, a C-shift (third shift) sanitation worker, detailed not only the horrendous working conditions at the plant but also spoke on broader political issues facing workers, including attacks from immigration agents and the ongoing war in Iran.

In an attempt to prevent workers from exercising their First Amendment rights, during the interview, a UFCW bureaucrat attempted to block WSWs reporters, demanding they first consult the union’s media representative.

Jaden, who has worked at the plant for two years, confirmed that management sought to collect updated contact information from workers prior to the strike in order to undermine it.

“They are trying to stop people from participating in the strike and stop fighting for what we are asking for,” he said, adding, “I think it’s really important for the sanitation crew to go on strike because we get less hours than production.”

Rejecting both the company’s 60-cent offer and the

UFCW Local 7 proposal of a \$2 raise for sanitation workers, Jaden called for a \$3-an-hour increase as a “bare minimum.”

“I’ve worked many other jobs that pay more, are safer and give us more hours,” he added.

Sanitation workers, he explained, are routinely forced to clock in at 10:30 p.m. only to be sent on break immediately, then made to work for hours without breaks or lunches, often receiving just six paid hours per shift.

“It’s not enough hours for us to be making a living off of it. And on top of that, they are proposing a 60 cent raise, which is not going to do much.” Jaden said he gets paid \$23.75 an hour.

“We can’t pay bills with that. In this job, they give us the bare minimum hours. They are also very strict on attendance. If you miss a day, you are suspended. Sick time doesn’t cover anything, they take away half a point, but then will give you a point. And then you get written up for it either way.”

Despite reaping millions in profits, JBS refuses to provide “better benefits, better paychecks,” Jaden said, adding that the company is “running short-staffed on supplies—There are barely any supplies in there.”

The Greeley facility processes roughly 8 percent of US beef production. To keep it profitable, sanitation workers are required to work with and inhale dangerous chemicals on a daily basis.

“You can get injured by the chemicals, which can just splash onto your face, even if you are wearing your goggles. There is a girl that had a chemical burn from that.”

Jaden said sanitation workers use chlorine-based sanitizer and sodium hydroxide. “They are very strong chemicals, and they get a lot stronger if you put hot water into them.”

Chlorine-based disinfectants, acidic cleaners and caustic agents, such as sodium hydroxide, pose well-known, life-threatening risks. When improperly handled or insufficiently rinsed between applications, these chemicals can react to release toxic gases, including chlorine, which can cause

severe respiratory distress, chemical burns to the lungs and, in high concentrations, death. Even without acute mixing incidents, exposure to aerosolized sprays and fumes in enclosed areas can trigger vomiting, dizziness and long-term respiratory damage.

Jaden explained that in the last week or so, “One of the supervisors that doesn’t really do chemicals like that, he mixed the chemicals wrong and it was very strong. It got to the point where I began vomiting on the floor. Management did not tell me to go home or anything. I just had to wait it out, stand outside.

“A co-worker and myself were outside, and we watched a training video which said if you smell chemicals that are overly strong, that could cause you sickness, leave the area, which I did. And then the green hat came out and demanded to know why I wasn’t working. I told him the chemicals are too strong. You could smell it, the whole locker room, which is upstairs, and all the way downstairs. That’s how strong it was.”

Workers are nominally provided Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), but Jaden said it is inadequate and often deducted from their pay.

“We wear our PPE, but they don’t give us the correct or proper pair of shoes and they overcharge us for when we end up missing something. Somebody will steal our PPE or we lose it, and then we end up paying for it.

“That come’s out of our paycheck, when it is something they should be providing.”

Like many workers at the plant, Jaden has scars from his time working at JBS. “When I first came here, I got injured on a conveyor belt. The PPE they gave us, we have to wear these sleeves and it made it very hard to take my arm out of it. I tried removing it and my glove got caught in the conveyor belt and it wrapped around my hand it tore into my skin.

“My skin was ripped and I was stuck in there for at least 10 minutes trying to get someone’s attention. The PPE they gave us and forced us to wear, I wasn’t able to get myself out of it, or take my gloves off fast enough. That sleeve just kept pinching onto my gloves and pinching onto my coat. So there was no way for me to get out of it.”

Jaden said that despite the serious nature of the injury and the fact it was caused by ill-fitting PPE, the company only paid for his medical bills, no workers comp or “big paycheck.”

Instead, the company punished him for almost losing his own hand. “They put me on a ‘cardinal rule,’” Jaden explained. “If I were to get hurt or mess up for a year after, I would be terminated.”

He detailed a litany of abuses at the plant. “Supervisors and managers can be very abusive and very sexual with co-

workers. You can see a lot of the blue hats and supervisors will flirt with the ladies and touch them.

“There was even a ‘green hat’ who punched one of the workers because he refused to work for a while. The ‘green hat’ took him to the back and punched him in the face. He didn’t get suspended or anything for punching the worker.”

Jaden said he did not recall any union official coming to the defense of the worker who was assaulted. “The union is barely called up ... they might be short staffed? I don’t know, I barely see any union workers (representatives).”

Turning to broader political issues, Jaden, like a majority of workers in the US and around the world, opposes the illegal war in Iran. “I already knew Trump was going to mess up, he wants to stay in office so bringing war to us is obviously his objective and his main goal.”

He also rejected the Trump administration’s “mass deportation” operation, “I hate how Trump attacks immigrants. I have cousins that are immigrants. My whole family are immigrants. I’m a citizen, but it’s still outrageous. They are going after children, they are going after people that just ‘look’ like they are not from here.

“Nobody is actually from here, I mean this land was stolen from the Natives.” Jaden agreed that the Trump administration’s attacks on immigrants were an attempt to divide workers against each other based on nationality. “I think it’s an attempt to bring back how it was before. ... I heard people talking about segregation coming back.”

He said that before the strike, JBS began diverting cattle to other plants. Asked by WSWWS reporters if meatpackers at the JBS plant in Cactus, Texas, who are also UFCW members, should join them on strike instead of handling the scab cattle, Jaden agreed. “I would support them going on strike with us. It would help, it would benefit. There is a lot more going on than just the pay cut. There’s the supervisors and the management.”

Jaden concluded that workers need to continue striking until JBS “bows down to what we need, because if they don’t, it will continue to be sh\*t. People have died working this job, and it’s not safe. We have had workers die on the job, and they continue production.”



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