The Smithfield meatpacking walkout and the toll of death in America's workplaces

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Roughly 100 workers at the Smithfield Foods pork plant in Monmouth, Illinois, walked off the job Monday after Patou Mpinda, a 44-year-old maintenance worker, was killed during the overnight shift. Their action is a sign of growing opposition in the working class to conditions in which thousands of preventable deaths each year are accepted as a cost of doing business.

Mpinda, a Congolese immigrant, died at about 2:31 a.m. A coworker said machinery was involved, but Smithfield has not disclosed which machine, what task he was performing or whether the equipment had been locked out. The county coroner has said the death is believed to be work-related, with a final ruling pending.

At 5:30 a.m., day-shift workers received only a text announcing a "late start." When they arrived at 7:30, hundreds were gathered in the lunchroom, many learning only then that a coworker had died. Some cried openly; others shouted at the plant manager, "Listen to your people! Why are we here? We shouldn't be working!"

According to one worker, management still ordered production to begin. African immigrant workers then reportedly took the lead in organizing a walkout, and roughly 100 people left the plant. Smithfield announced that workers could leave without penalty, but only after collective action had begun.

The workers did not wait for permission from the company or from any official organization. The plant is non-union.

Monmouth's Congolese community supplies a large share of the plant's workforce, as immigrants and refugees do throughout the meatpacking industry. The Trump administration's campaign of raids, detention camps and mass deportation is aimed at terrorizing this section of the working class into silence and, through it, disciplining the workforce as a whole. That these workers defied management in a small Illinois town shows the growing mood of anger and resistance in the working class.

Meatpacking is among the most dangerous industries in the United States. In April 2020, as COVID-19 tore through the plants, including Monmouth, which was forced to close temporarily, Trump invoked the Defense Production Act to keep them running. Hundreds of meatpacking workers died. The administration is now moving to lift remaining limits on line speeds.

Last spring, 3,800 workers at the JBS beef plant in Greeley, Colorado, carried out the largest US meatpacking strike in decades. The Greeley workers, the great majority of them immigrants, stayed out for three weeks against poverty wages, speedup and unsafe conditions. United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 7 allowed JBS to divert cattle to another UFCW plant in Texas, then ordered the strikers back without a contract and pushed through a deal 30 cents better than the company's initial offer.

The Monmouth walkout points to the potential for a broader movement. Monmouth lies in the industrial region along the Illinois-Iowa border, where opposition has repeatedly broken into the open. In the nearby Quad Cities, John Deere workers were among the 10,000 nationwide who last month rejected a proposed contract extension. They are determined to reverse the 1,600 job cuts and the concessions imposed since the United Auto Workers betrayed their 2021 strike.

In Joslin, Illinois, Tyson announced on August 13 that it was closing its meatpacking plant and wiping out about 2,500 jobs. Six hundred people packed an emergency community meeting. United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 431 has sought to channel the anger into appeals to corporate and government officials, while boasting of its years of "partnership" with Tyson.

The investigation into Mpinda's death cannot be left to Smithfield or the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). In February, the agency cited the Monmouth plant for a serious lockout-tagout violation after two employees cleaning an auger were exposed to an amputation hazard. In July, it reduced the $14,188 penalty to $9,931.60. Serious citations in 2023 and 2025 also ended in reduced fines.

The pattern is the same at Smithfield's plant in Tar Heel, North Carolina, the largest pork plant in the world. On January 10, Abundio Villa Miranda, 43, died horrifically after falling approximately 25 feet into an area where hogs are stunned with gas. He left two children, ages 10 and 14.

Investigators found four serious violations involving fall protection, hazardous-energy control and confined spaces, and Smithfield settled a $51,100 penalty for $35,770. Villa Miranda was one of three workers to die at Tar Heel in 10 months. The

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presence of the UFCW, which has held a contract at the plant since 2009, did nothing to prevent these deaths.

Across the United States, a worker is killed by a traumatic injury every 104 minutes. The latest complete federal figures record 5,070 such deaths in 2024, and the AFL-CIO estimates that another 135,000 people died from occupational illnesses in 2023.

The past four months alone have seen 11 workers killed in an explosion at the Horizon Biofuels plant in Longview, Washington, in May; two killed in an explosion at Brent Industries in Ohio on August 18; and 33-year-old Bradley Clouse crushed by machinery on September 2 at an Astemo auto parts plant in Kentucky previously cited for machine-guarding violations. On September 4, Paul Roberts, 63, was killed at a UPS facility in Earth City, Missouri, 13 days before his planned retirement.

This is part of global process. On August 24, 39-year-old ground crew worker Oscar Robayo was crushed to death by the landing gear of an Airbus A350-900 at the Montréal-Trudeau International Airport in a tragedy due to years of deregulation and profiteering.

These deaths are the product of the ruling class's drive to make workers pay for the crisis of capitalism. Federal debt in the US has passed $40 trillion, annual interest costs exceed $1 trillion, and Washington is preparing a military budget approaching $1.5 trillion as it wages war against Iran, escalates the conflict with Russia and prepares for war with China. The resources for this must be extracted from the working class. On the shop floor, that means mass layoffs through AI and automation, compulsory overtime, speedup and deferred maintenance.

Trump stands at the head of this offensive. His fiscal 2026 budget proposal called for 223 fewer OSHA positions and an estimated 30 percent reduction in inspections, and sought to eliminate the Chemical Safety Board. But the attack is bipartisan. Under Biden, OSHA remained chronically understaffed and the annual toll of traumatic workplace deaths never fell below 5,000, while the Democrats approved record Pentagon budgets.

The union bureaucracies, tied to management and the capitalist parties, work to suppress opposition. They organize no action after workplace deaths and leave investigations to management and government agencies, while promoting the nationalism that binds workers to trade war and military conflict.

Workers need new organizations: rank-and-file safety committees, elected and controlled by workers themselves, to investigate deaths and injuries, secure safety and maintenance records, and organize collective action to stop unsafe production.

There is a model for this. After Stellantis worker Ronald Adams Sr. was crushed to death at the Dundee Engine Complex in Michigan, an independent rank-and-file investigation exposed the bypassing of lockout protections with "cheater keys," examined alterations to machine software and held a public hearing.

Smithfield workers should organize an investigation of the same kind, gathering coworker testimony and production and maintenance records and enlisting trusted safety experts to establish how Mpinda was killed and which corporate practices produced the conditions.

There is a developing movement of workers throughout the world. In recent weeks, protests against soaring fuel and food prices, driven up by the US war against Iran, have spread from Guatemala, where truckers blockaded highways and indigenous organizations marched on Congress, to Syria, the Philippines and Portugal.

Volkswagen plans to destroy up to 100,000 jobs as Germany carries out its largest military buildup since Hitler. In Turkey, workers occupied a factory while miners fought unpaid wages and arrests.

At National Steel Car in Hamilton, Ontario, where three workers were killed between 2020 and 2022, 1,200 workers have struck against unsafe conditions and a lethal piece-rate system, and a rank-and-file committee has coordinated support with railroad workers across North America. Postal workers in Springfield, Massachusetts, have formed a committee and called for coordination with workers in Britain, Canada, Germany and Australia.

Smithfield workers should build a committee at Monmouth and call on workers at Tar Heel, Joslin and throughout meatpacking to do the same. Their demands should include workers' control over line speed, staffing and maintenance; full access to safety records; the right to stop work without loss of pay; and protection for every worker who reports a hazard. Linked through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, such committees can prepare coordinated action across companies, industries and national borders.

The fight for workers' control of safety and production leads directly to a political struggle against the capitalist system, which subordinates both to profit. The major corporations must be transformed into public enterprises under workers' democratic control, with production organized to meet human need. The Monmouth workers, acting on their own initiative, have shown the power that lies in collective action. That initiative must now be organized, broadened and directed toward the socialist reorganization of economic life.

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