

Smithfield workers speak out against deadly conditions after death of Patou Mpinda in Illinois meatpacking plant

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30 September 2026

Meatpacking workers: tell us what conditions are at your facility by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Workers at the Smithfield Foods pork processing plant in Monmouth, Illinois are speaking out over deadly conditions inside the facility following the September 14 death of 44-year-old Congolese immigrant Patou Mpinda. Smithfield, the world's largest pork processor, is owned by the Hong Kong-based WH Group. Its Monmouth plant employs approximately 1,600 workers and slaughters an estimated 10,000 hogs per day.

Mpinda was killed while performing maintenance on machinery at approximately 2:30 a.m. Coworkers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he had been assigned to work alone on a machine that required at least a two-person maintenance team or safety observer. According to workers at the plant, Mpinda was strangled after his sweater became caught in the machine and was pulled around his neck.

Around 100 workers walked out shortly afterward. Day-shift workers received a text message at about 5:30 a.m. announcing only a "late start." When they arrived at approximately 7:30 a.m., hundreds of workers were gathered in the lunchroom, many learning only then that Mpinda had been killed. Workers described coworkers crying and confronting plant management, demanding, "Listen to your people! Why are we here? We shouldn't be working!" After workers were told that production would resume, approximately 100 left the plant. The action was documented by workers on social media.

The walkout at Smithfield is part of a broader re-emergence of the class struggle in the United States and internationally, as workers are driven into conflict with the giant corporations by increasingly intolerable conditions of work and life.

In March, approximately 3,800 workers at the JBS beef plant in Greeley, Colorado struck for nearly a month over wages, safety conditions and company retaliation, in the first strike at a US beef slaughterhouse in four decades.

In August, Tyson Foods abruptly closed its beef slaughterhouse in Joslin, Illinois, eliminating approximately 2,500 jobs with virtually no advance notice. Workers responded with protests demanding that the plant remain open and that

Tyson provide full compensation and benefits to those thrown out of work.

Immigrant workers are playing a prominent role in these struggles, exposing attempts to scapegoat immigrants and pointing to the international dimensions of the struggles of the working class. A substantial portion of the Smithfield workforce consists of French-speaking immigrants from the Democratic Republic of Congo; African immigrant workers were among those who led the walkout. Across the US animal slaughtering and processing industry, 42 percent of workers are foreign-born, more than twice the national average.

The logic of these struggles requires independent rank-and-file committees, uniting workers across national and racial boundaries across the country and the world, to coordinate action over safety, jobs and the defense of immigrant workers.

Coverup underway at Smithfield

Patou Mpinda died at approximately 2:30 a.m. on Monday, September 14, while performing maintenance at the Smithfield pork plant in Monmouth.

Following the death, Smithfield management sought to portray the incident as the result of personal carelessness on the part of the worker. Company representatives claimed Mpinda had failed to follow standard safety operating procedures.

Coworkers who spoke to the WSWWS directly rejected this claim. They explained that Mpinda had been assigned to work alone on an active, complex machine that required a minimum two-person maintenance team or an active safety observer. Understaffing and the pressure to minimize downtime led management to send Mpinda into the machine without basic safety coverage.

Following the incident, workers shared that management at the plant immediately began a coverup operation. Managers attempted to sell the idea to the work force that Patou was responsible for his own death because he was wearing a

pullover hoodie rather than a zip-up. Workers were banned from taking their phones into the plant to prevent photos and video of the unsafe conditions from becoming widely known.

Other Smithfield workers described a systematic practice of removing safety guards from machines across the plant. These physical guards and interlocks are taken off because they slow down production and make clearing mechanical jams more time-consuming. As a result, serious injuries are frequent throughout the Monmouth facility, including regular finger and hand amputations.

When an accident occurs or when regulatory inspections are anticipated, supervisors will temporarily replace the guards on the machinery. Once the immediate scrutiny passes, the guards are removed again to restore the speed of the line.

Just forty-eight hours after Mpinda's death, another worker suffered a severe fall on the slaughterhouse floor, breaking an arm and a leg. Production continued without interruption, workers told reporters.

In recent months, a group of workers who met independently outside the plant to discuss forming an organization to improve conditions were discovered and summarily fired.

These shop-floor accounts are corroborated by public statements from community members whose relatives have worked at the facility. One comment on social media described the conditions inside Monmouth:

"I had a friend that worked there and he said he still has nightmares about this place, there are a lot of people with missing fingers, parts, etc as due to work accidents, people get injured from repetitive movements over and over all day, the supervisors get angry if you ask them to go to the bathroom as they have to cover you, they use scare tactics on their employees to prevent them from speaking up, 2 relatives have died of cancer, they both worked on the same department there. This is modern day slavery undercover!"

The conditions documented at Monmouth are well known to federal regulatory bodies. Over the past five years, OSHA has repeatedly cited the Monmouth facility for serious workplace hazards, including violations of the Control of Hazardous Energy (Lockout/Tagout) standard. In February 2026, OSHA cited Smithfield in Monmouth after two maintenance workers cleaning an industrial auger were exposed to severe amputation hazards.

The agency initially proposed a penalty of \$14,188, which was later reduced through informal negotiations to \$9,931.60 in July 2026 — shortly before Mpinda's death. Prior to this, in October 2025, the same facility was cited for exposure to toxic chemical vapors and insufficient personal protection, which carried a \$15,625 proposed fine settled for \$11,250.00 amid ongoing worker concerns over chronic respiratory illness and cancer. Similar citations issued in 2023 and 2025 for chemical vapors and mechanical hazards were likewise settled for reduced fines.

Immigrant workers face expanding ICE crackdown

While Smithfield is being left off the hook for injuries and deaths at the facility, the immigrant workforce of the region is being viciously targeted by ICE.

In April, ICE agents arrested eight workers at two Davenport restaurants without advance notice to local police. Federal detention records also show 45 ICE detention stays at the Scott County Jail in Davenport between August 2024 and August 2026, with nearly all ending in removal.

ICE maintains a "hold room" at its nearby Rock Island office, with federal records associating at least 322 detentions with the site. Nearby Muscatine County Jail is under contract to house ICE detainees, an arrangement that has already generated at least five federal lawsuits.

Records from East Moline show that outside law-enforcement agencies searched the city's network of license-plate cameras 146 times for immigration-related purposes in May 2025 alone, including searches explicitly labeled "ICE," "ICE warrant" and "Immigration Enforcement."

The impact on the region's food-sector workforce has become serious enough that in 2025 the Chicago Region Food System Fund awarded the Quad Cities immigrant-support nonprofit Akwaaba QC \$25,000 in emergency funding for workers affected by heightened ICE policing, detention and deportation. The fund said the sudden removal of workers was disrupting the food system and leaving workers and their families afraid even to leave their homes.

Under such conditions, the action by the immigrant workers in Smithfield not only showed tremendous courage. They raise the emergence of an independent movement of the working class defending democratic and social rights.

Organizing rank-and-file committees at Monmouth and throughout the meatpacking industry would give workers a means to act collectively over safety and jobs, defend immigrant coworkers against persecution, and link their struggles with workers confronting the same corporations and conditions elsewhere in the United States and internationally.



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