

“They just throw us away”: Tyson workers speak out after Joslin, Illinois plant closure

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Meatpacking workers: Speak out against the Tyson closure in Joslin by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept confidential.

About 2,500 workers at Tyson Foods’ beef plant in Joslin, Illinois, face the end of their regular pay on October 12, two months after the company abruptly shut down production. Families who spent decades working at the slaughterhouse are seeking food and clothing assistance, while laid-off workers struggle to find employment in the Quad Cities region along the Illinois-Iowa border.

Tyson announced the closure on August 13 and stopped slaughter and processing operations that day and the next. Its state filing covered 2,495 employees; it was submitted no more than an hour before the plant’s closure was announced to workers. To avoid running afoul of laws requiring advance notice before layoffs, Tyson agreed to continue paying them for the next two months. Sanitation contractor Fortrex subsequently announced another 103 layoffs at the site.

Laid-off workers rallied outside the plant after the announcement, demanding a plan either to keep it open or six months of severance. The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), which represented the Joslin workforce, subsequently signed an agreement committing it to cooperate with the shutdown and oppose actions that interfere with it.

Tyson cited the historic shortage of cattle in announcing a restructuring of its beef business. It is also closing its facility in Eagle Mountain, Utah, and pursuing the sale of its plant in Pasco, Washington. The company said it would shift capacity to plants in Nebraska, Kansas and Texas, concentrating production at locations it considers more competitive.

Despite losses in its beef division, Tyson as a whole remains profitable. In its third-quarter results, released 10 days before the Joslin announcement, it reported \$13.87 billion in sales and \$362 million in operating income, up 39 percent from a year earlier. It had \$4 billion in liquidity as of June 27. Workers are being made to bear the cost of a restructuring aimed at protecting returns to shareholders.

In its response to the closure, Local 1546 President Robert O’Toole praised the union’s “long-standing and proud union partnership with Tyson Foods.” The plant-closing agreement dated August 18 translated that partnership into binding commitments: The union agreed to cooperate with the closure, refrain from interference and withhold support from others taking such action.

If workers interfered, officials were required to publicly disavow the action and order members to stop.

In return, the agreement provided just one to four weeks of severance, depending on length of service, calculated at 36 hours per week. Even workers with more than 10 years at Tyson received only four weeks. The agreement also contained a broad release of claims against the company, including claims under the federal plant-closure notification law.

Joslin workers need full wage and benefit continuation, financed by Tyson, and a fight against further closures and layoffs. Rank-and-file committees can unite workers across Tyson and other meatpacking companies, defend immigrant coworkers against raids and deportations, and coordinate actions through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). Workers who built their lives around these plants must have a decisive voice over their jobs and the conditions of production.

WSWS reporters spoke with former workers and immigrant support organization Akwaaba QC about the closure’s consequences. Many workers have made the region their home, raising families while supporting relatives abroad. The shutdown now threatens to uproot them, while immigration arrests make even the search for another job a source of fear.

Nana Ouro-Agoro, president of Akwaaba QC, emigrated from Togo in 2008. Akwaaba QC provides language assistance, housing support and help accessing services for immigrants and refugees.

At a relief center established for displaced Tyson workers, she said the organization was expanding food assistance. She described a couple who came to the organization for food and clothing after working at Tyson for 25 and 23 years respectively.

“The way they closed was very shocking, very sad. People were traumatized.

“They came for food and clothing, and they are like, ‘I can’t believe Tyson closed after that many years.’ For these people, it is very hard to move on. They are stuck. They couldn’t believe this happened to them... They just throw us away.

“I couldn’t sleep for three days. And I’m still traumatized even though I wasn’t working there. Just to see how they treated people.”

“When they closed Tyson, we found the need for food was increasing. That’s why we decided to have this location where we can have freezers and get meat for them. From those I know, more than a thousand immigrant workers were at the Tyson plant.”

She said the number of available jobs, compounded by language barriers, could not meet workers' needs. Moving elsewhere would mean leaving communities built over many years.

"When we try to approach them to go maybe out of state, maybe Michigan, JBS in Nebraska ... they don't want to leave the Quad Cities. They say, 'We love the Quad Cities. We have our family here.' This has become home for a lot of people."

The Trump administration's assault on immigrants adds the threat of detention to the loss of employment. Ouro-Agoro reported arrests among Akwaaba's clients, including asylum seekers with current work permits.

"The fear is there, especially for asylum seekers. Those who have work permits—They are arresting them! They are detaining them. So we have clients, people who have work permits, who are fearful now: 'Where am I going to go and find a job with my work permit? I don't want to go far and be arrested.'"

"We have two clients who have been detained in Iowa ... and then we have one who was detained, and we worked with a lawyer and he was released one month ago. And now I got a call from someone who has been detained in Missouri who needs a lawyer to get released."

Workers seeking help after injuries and dismissals at Tyson had repeatedly encountered indifference from UFCW officials, Ouro-Agoro said.

"I hear the story of our clients who have been hurt, who fight to get workers' comp, and Tyson kept fighting them. They feel like they are treated worse than the beef. Two years ago, people asked for family leave, went back to their home country, and when they came back, Tyson fired all of them! It was more than 50 of them, and they came to me.

"And where was the union? Union officials told workers to set up an appointment, workers went, and nothing came out of that! The union was corrupt. The one person from the union who was fighting hard for workers—They fired him!

"So when people look at Smithfield" in nearby Monmouth, where a worker died on the job recently, "there is no union there, so management does whatever they want to do. But at Tyson, even though they had a union, the union is corrupt. They can't say anything, no matter what's going on."

The UFCW also left the family of 22-year-old Joslin worker Casen Garcia to fight for answers after his death in the plant's rendering unit on July 9, 2022. His mother, Allison Rose, told the WSWS that coworkers reported he had complained of chest pain and difficulty breathing before collapsing, but management told him to continue working. OSHA classified the death as natural causes. Three years later, Rose said she had never heard from the union; coworkers had supplied the information she obtained.

Bayou Visaka, a laid-off production worker from Togo in West Africa, began working at Joslin in March 2012, soon after arriving in the United States.

"When I came from Africa, this was my first place. I never been anywhere else," he said. "I did work as a production worker, like on the line cutting meat for about six years."

On August 13, his supervisor called workers into a conference room shortly before the end of their shift.

"And it was around 1:54 p.m., but the shift ends at 2:30 p.m. It

was like 35 or 40 minutes before the shift ends! And then we were told that, 'Okay, the plant is closing.' And everybody was like in shock ... Nobody saw that coming at all. Nobody saw it.

"Before that, they were blaming everything about the cattle shortage, saying the cattle is expensive so they're not really making enough money. We were doing short hours, working six hours, or saying no work Monday or Friday. But nobody saw it coming.

"Working at Tyson is not really easy," Visaka said. "It's a hard job. A lot of people when they come they say, 'Okay yeah, I just come here to study and find a better job.' But when you come here and then you have families back in Africa waiting for you, you cannot spend all your time going to school ... So we just stick there.

"It's really hard because the two months is almost over. And if you see the number of people who work there, it's a big number. Not everybody is going to find a job like that quick. It's gonna be hard."

"Some people are saying, 'I applied, but I haven't been approved.' And others were told, 'Since Tyson is still paying you guys, we cannot be paying you. The two months has to pass before you can apply.' So there is just confusion."

Visaka also supported the walkout by workers at Smithfield's pork plant in nearby Monmouth, Illinois, following the September 14 death of coworker Patou Mpinda.

"About this Smithfield incident ... on the news they say safety is not really great because OSHA cited the plant multiple times. As for the workers walking out [after the death], I think what they did is great. That's human nature because the production shouldn't continue if something like this happened!

"Right now, especially in America, a lot of people are struggling. And it's not only here, I think it's everywhere. Safety should be number one. We shouldn't be just caring about making profits or money, money, money. Money comes and goes; people's well-being is the most important."



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