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Massive opposition by US meatpacking employees to forced return to work

With nearly 900 meatpacking workers at the Tyson Foods plant in Logansport, Indiana testing positive for COVID-19, workers in meatpacking and processing across the United States are expressing their opposition to Trump's executive order forcing the reopening of meat processing plants.

On Friday, 890 of 2,200 workers at the Tyson Foods pork plant in Logansport were confirmed to have tested positive for COVID-19. The staggering 40 percent infection rate represents an increase of more than 700 cases over the number reported by the local Cass County Health Department the previous week.

Despite the risk posed to the health of workers as well as their families and close contacts, Cass County Commissioner Ryan Browning told local news that he and Tyson are working on a plan to reopen the Logansport plant starting next week in compliance with Trump's order.

Trump's executive order was issued two days after Tyson launched a full-page newspaper ad campaign stoking fears of food shortages and pointing to potential food waste resulting from the temporary closure of some of its facilities. In essence, management was telling workers that they must face potential illness and death in the interest of making profits for the meatpacking executives.

Across the US, meatpacking plants have emerged as major incubators of the virus, fueling the spread of COVID-19 in less densely populated areas of the country. Sioux City, Iowa, home to 11 meatpacking plants, has one of the fastest growing COVID-19 infection rates

in the US according to a report from Iowa Starting Line. A staggering 18 percent of all meatpacking workers in Iowa have tested positive for COVID-19, according to the Centers for Disease Control, with the real infection rate likely much higher in the absence of universal testing and with some states refusing to release their data.

So far, at least 6,500 US meatpacking workers have been infected with COVID-19, and at least 25 have died from the disease.

President Trump's executive order Tuesday using the Defense Production Act to force meatpacking workers across the nation back to work has generated significant opposition in the working class. The executive order deemed meatpacking vital infrastructure. At the same time Trump moved to protect meat and poultry companies from facing any liability for their workers becoming ill or dying from COVID-19 as a result of being forced back to work.

In conjunction with Trump's order, the governors of Iowa, Oklahoma, and other states have blocked meatpacking workers who refuse to work on health grounds from unemployment benefits. With Iowa experiencing the highest rise in the COVID-19 infection rate among all US states, now standing at 75 percent, Governor Kim Reynolds has made clear that workers who refuse her return-to-work order will lose their unemployment benefits. Iowa Workforce Development officials have stated that refusal to return to work when ordered by employers would amount to a 'voluntary resignation' and disqualify workers from state aid.

Despite the media's promotion of the small right-wing protests in several states against stay-at-home orders, Americans overwhelmingly support measures aimed at promoting social distancing to combat the spread of COVID-19. A Politico/Morning Consult poll last week found that 76 percent of respondents supported restrictive measures for as long as necessary, even if it harms the economy.

Trump's executive order and attempts by various US governors in collaboration with corporate officials to force workers to choose between losing their jobs and unemployment benefits or illness and death presents workers with an impossible choice. The end result will be the more rapid spread of the virus.

In tandem with the Trump administration, the Democratic Party-backed trade unions are doing their part to assist the push to keep meatpacking plants open. In a statement Tuesday issued following Trump's executive order announcement, the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), representing approximately 250,000 industry

workers, while offering pious platitudes about safety, made no pretense that it would do anything serious to mobilize workers against the joint company-government drive to force meatpacking workers back to work.

In relation to the executive order, UFCW president Marc Perrone declared, “While we share the concern over the food supply, today’s executive order to force meatpacking plants to stay open must put the safety of our country’s meatpacking workers first.”

However, the moves by the administration and industry leaders to force a return to work have fueled intense opposition in the working class. On Wednesday CNN published a piece featuring interviews from Tyson’s plants in Iowa in response to the executive order where workers warned that they and their co-workers would not return to work.

Donald, a Tyson worker from the Waterloo, Iowa plant who is recovering from a COVID-19 infection, told CNN, “All I know is, this is crazy to me, because I can’t see all these people going back into work. I’m still trying to figure out: What is he going to do, force them to stay open? Force people to go to work?” he asked.

In response to Trump’s executive order, Sheila, a former Tyson worker, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “The safety of the workers needs to be the first priority. Obviously, these factories have had a high rate of COVID-19 cases for them to be shut down. I feel that people are going to be scared to go back and that they shouldn’t be forced to do so.”

She continued, “In rushing these people back into the factories, will the companies be able to ensure that all the health and safety guidelines are met for their employees? From the beginning when they were tagged, ‘essential workers,’ they have been excused from any of their fears and concerns and have been expected to be on the job. That led to outbreaks of the virus in their workplaces causing closures and now they are demanded to work!

“And, if I’m not mistaken, if an employee goes to work as ordered and gets sick, the government will not allow that person to file a lawsuit against their employer? Nope, no way.”

The situation confronting meatpacking workers indicates the real political line-up of forces in the United States. On the one hand, the White House, local government officials, corporate CEOs and their trade union front men; and on the other, the working class.

The conclusion that must be drawn is the necessity for the development of an independent political movement of the working class. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of independent rank-and-file factory committees in every workplace to oversee

health and safety. This must be combined with a political fight directed against the capitalist profit system and the subordination of the vital interests of society to the ruthless drive for private profit.

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