

Meatpackers and Trump lie, workers die

written by Stephen Millies
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Saul Sanchez

Saul Sanchez didn't have to die from the coronavirus. The 78-year-old worker at the JBS meatpacking plant in Greeley, Colo., died on April 7. His fellow workers, his six children and 12 grandchildren mourn him.

Supervision never told Sanchez that some employees had already tested positive for the virus. "They knew their employees were testing positive for COVID-19 a week before my dad got sick," said Sanchez's daughter, Beatrice Rangel.

The world's biggest meat and poultry outfit, with sales of \$51.7 billion last year, failed to quickly provide personal protective equipment to workers. Neither did JBS make any attempt to socially distance its employees. Workers at meat and poultry plants continue to work close together on production lines, often two feet apart.

Management lied to Local 7 officials of the United Food and Commercial Workers union. Bosses claimed that Sanchez had caught the virus while on vacation when in fact he hadn't taken any time off.

Saul Sanchez spent [over 30 years of his life](#) as an essential worker at the Greeley plant. But as Beatrice Rangel said, he was "just a number" to JBS.

In addition to Saul Sanchez, five other workers died at the JBS plant in Greeley. Two hundred and ninety others have tested positive.

Weld County health officials closed the Greeley plant in April. But JBS was able to get it reopened in less than two weeks without implementing many of the safety measures that were needed. Not even all the returning workers were tested for the coronavirus.

'Social distancing is a nicety'

The biggest hotspots in the United States for the coronavirus are prisons and slaughterhouses. Around [2,237 inmates at California's San Quentin prison](#) have

caught the virus. Twenty-six of them have died.

At least 203 meatpacking workers have died of COVID-19, while 42,534 meatpacking workers in 494 plants have tested positive for the coronavirus.

Just as the prisons are filled with Black, Indigenous and Latinx people, so are the meatpacking and poultry plants. [Seven out of every eight meatpacking employees](#) who have tested positive for COVID-19 are workers of color and/or immigrants.

Smithfield Foods is the world's biggest pork company. At its Sioux Falls, S. D., plant, 1,294 workers have tested positive for the coronavirus. Four of them died.

That doesn't seem to bother Smithfield CEO Kenneth Sullivan as much as state governments issuing stay-at-home orders. In a letter to Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts, Sullivan claimed these absolutely necessary health measures were causing "hysteria."

According to this pork boss, "Social distancing is a nicety that makes sense only for people with laptops."

[In a letter](#) to Sens. Cory Booker and Elizabeth Warren, Sullivan wrote, "Please understand, processing plants were no more designed to operate in a pandemic than hospitals were designed to produce pork. ... For better or worse, our plants are what they are."

So "for better or worse," workers had to die while [Sullivan takes home \\$14 million a year](#).

This CEO figures he can get away with such open callousness after decades of an anti-union offensive by big business. Deindustrialization has destroyed thousands of unionized workplaces.

Pork boss Sullivan's letters are reminiscent of Richard Mellon's outburst towards a group of U.S. senators after he broke a United Mine Workers union strike in 1925. Explaining why he needed to hire private gunmen, Mellon declared, "You could not run a coal company without machine guns!"

Last year the Bank of New York Mellon Corporation had assets of \$381 billion.

The parrot in the White House

The springtime surge of COVID-19 throughout the meat and poultry industry frightened the dead animal capitalists. Not because workers were dying but because they might be forced to to make their factories safe.

President Trump came to their rescue. He issued an executive order on April 28 keeping the packing plants open, citing the Defense Production Act.

This order overrode union leaders and local health officials who sought to close the plants until they could be operated safely. So much for "local control" and "federalism."

Trump's decree saved the meatpackers billions while thousands more workers caught the virus. [It followed almost word for word](#) a draft written by Julie Potts, president of the North American Meat Institute.

With the presidential selection getting close, the Trump-controlled Occupational Safety and Health Administration fined Smithfield \$13,494. This election stunt works out to \$3,373.50 for each of the four workers who died at Smithfield's Sioux Falls plant or ten bucks for every employee there who tested positive for COVID-19.

Mike Perrone, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers, rightfully called this OSHA fine a ["slap on the wrist."](#)

OSHA also fined the JBS plant in Greeley, where Saul Sanchez and five other workers died, \$15,615. UFCW union members answered this insulting figure — which amounts to \$2,602.50 for each worker who died — [by demonstrating on Sept. 16](#).

Trump may be the richest scoundrel to have ever occupied the White House, but he follows orders like every other president.

When the Meat Institute or other big capitalists call, Trump answers. Poor and working people suffer. We need to fight back.

