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Killing workers, jacking-up prices: Dead animal capitalists sacrificed meat and poultry workers

written by Stephen Millies
December 3, 2021



In June 2015, Chicago's Ruprecht Company and ICE threatened to deport immigrant meatpackers. The workers went on strike. Photo: UNITE HERE Local 1

Fifty-nine thousand workers at the five biggest U.S. meatpacking companies fell ill from COVID-19. That's three times higher than previous estimates, according to the House of Representatives Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis.

[At least 269 workers died.](#) Thousands more got sick at other meatpacking companies and the poultry plants.

At the same time meat monopolists have been [sending prices through the roof](#). Over the last year beef prices shot up by over 12% while pork prices rose nearly 10%. Chicken now costs 7.2% more.

Dead workers and inflated prices created super-profits for carcass capitalists. Tyson Foods raked in [\\$3 billion in profits](#), a 48% annual increase. Cargill had the [biggest profits](#) in its 156 year history.

Cargill has no intention to share its \$28 billion in net income with the workers that produce it. The Minneapolis-based outfit announced plans to [lock out Canadian workers](#) at its High River, Alberta, plant near Calgary.

These corporations get away from this robbery because of the stepped-up monopolization since the 1970s. The White House confirmed this in a [Sept. 8 statement](#):

“In 1977, the largest four beef-packing firms controlled just 25% of the market, compared to 82% today. In poultry, the top four processing firms controlled 35% of the market in 1986, compared to 54% today. And in pork, the top four hog-processing firms controlled 33% of the market in 1976, compared to 66% today.”

The news release pointed out that “the meat-processors are generating record profits during the pandemic, at the expense of consumers, farmers, and ranchers.” And it said that “workers are risking their health and safety to keep America fed.”

‘Our plants are what they are’

So why does President Biden tolerate the Occupational Health and Safety Administration giving wrist slaps to the big packers for deadly safety violations?

By June 16, 2020, 1,294 workers at Smithfield Foods’ Sioux Falls, South Dakota, pork plant caught the virus. Four workers died because of the company’s negligence and drive for profits. OSHA recently [fined Smithfield Foods](#) \$13,494.

That’s \$10.43 for every worker who fell ill or \$3,374 for every worker that died.

United Food and Commercial Workers Local 304A, which represents workers at the Sioux Falls plant, [condemned this rotten settlement](#). The union called it “a clear failure to recognize the company’s safety issues and (is) allowing the company to police itself on workers safety.”

In order to stop the spread of COVID-19, health officials urge us to keep six feet apart. Meat bosses sneer at social distancing. On many meat and poultry production lines, workers are just two feet away from each other.

Then-Smithfield Foods CEO Kenneth Sullivan wrote to Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts that “social distancing is a nicety that makes sense only for people with laptops.” In a letter to Senators Elizabeth Warren and Cory Booker, [Sullivan declared](#) that “for better or worse, our plants are what they are.”

“For better or worse,” hundreds of workers died while the dead animal capitalists collected billions more in profit. On April 28, 2020—Workers’ Memorial Day—Donald Trump ordered the meat and poultry plants to remain open.

Trump’s executive order came two days after John H. Tyson, CEO of his family’s Tyson Foods, [placed newspaper ads](#) claiming “the food supply chain is vulnerable.”

Tyson never cared how the pandemic made the workers in his slaughterhouses more vulnerable to death and disease.

Tyson’s plants in Arkansas reported nearly 3,000 cases of COVID between May 19, 2020, and April 8, 2021. That’s almost a third of all [the state’s workplace cases](#).

Decades of union busting

Working in the packing plants has always been dangerous.

Between 2015 and 2017, an average of two workers a week had one of [their limbs](#)

[amputated](#).

A century ago it was worse. People were horrified by Upton Sinclair's description in his 1906 novel "The Jungle" of a worker falling into a boiling vat. ("The Jungle" is spoiled by a racist description of Black workers.)

It was unions that turned this around. In 1917 Chicago's Union Stockyards was the largest concentration of workers in the United States.

Over 50,000 workers were employed there. Until 1957 a branch of Chicago's elevated trains went there. Two of the stations on this "el" were [named after packing companies](#): Swift and Armour.

Meatpacker bosses were among the richest of the rich. Philip Armour told how he used bigotry to divide workers: "Keep the races and nationalities apart after working hours and to foment suspicion, rivalry and even enmity among such groups." ("Down on the Killing Floor, Black and White Workers in Chicago's Packinghouses, 1904-1954")

By 1917 a quarter of the workers in the Chicago stockyards were Black. In the first years of the Great Migration, meatpacking and the steel mills were the largest employers of Black labor.

The same year a union drive was begun in the stockyards. Its organizer was the future communist leader William Z. Foster.

The ruling class used racism to stop workers from uniting. In 1919 Chicago police allowed racist white mobs to kill 23 Black people.

The 1930s were different. The United Packinghouse Workers of the CIO won union contracts for workers in Chicago and across the country. Two of the main organizers were the communists Henry Johnson and Herb March.

UPWA members fought against segregation in Chicago, Kansas City and other places. Automation allowed the wealthy and powerful to throw workers back.

Slaughterhouses moved out of Chicago and other big cities to be closer to the feedlots. After a long decline, the Union stockyards closed in 1971.

This greatly reduced an important base of support for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when he came to Chicago in 1966. Dr. King joined the Chicago Freedom Movement to fight housing segregation. Racists hit him with a brick.

Many of the new packing houses and poultry plants have been organized by the UFCW, which includes the old UPWA locals. On [May Day in 2006](#), immigrant workers and their supporters walked out of the National Beef Packing plant in Greeley, Kansas.

That's in the southwest corner of the Sunflower State, hundreds of miles away from a big city. Meat and poultry workers are fighting back.

