

# A timeline of the COVID-19 meatpacking disaster: How the ruling class conspired to keep plants open

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The World Socialist Web Site urges meatpacking workers to get in touch with us to share news tips, comments and stories of working conditions in your plant, and to learn how to build a rank-and-file committee of workers. Your privacy is of utmost importance and any information given will be kept anonymous. Contact us today.

Two new revelations made public in the last week have unearthed a vast conspiracy of the ruling elite, both Democratic and Republican, to force meatpacking plants to remain open throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last week, consumer advocacy group Food and Water Watch filed a lawsuit accusing Smithfield Foods, a major pork producer and food-processing company, of falsely stoking consumer fears of meat shortages during the pandemic in order to keep their operations running at full capacity. The advocacy group provides evidence that the US was, in fact, *never in danger* of running out of meat. According to the group, the US could have kept meat supply stocked in supermarkets for several months without production running.

The second revelation consists of a trove of documents, including emails between high ranking Trump administration officials, the USDA and various US state governors, that were obtained through a public records request by the law firm Public Justice. The documents reveal, among other things, that Agriculture secretary Sonny Perdue and staff at USDA and the vice president's office attempted to prevent state governments from temporarily shutting down meatpacking plants to control the spread of the virus.

The revelations illustrate the way in which the ruling establishment, aided and abetted by the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW), conspired to keep meatpacking plants open. Below is a timeline of these events which detail how the decisions led to hundreds of meatpacking worker deaths and thousands of related deaths throughout the US.

## January 21, 2020

The CDC confirms the first US COVID-19 Case.

## Early March, 2020

As COVID-19 testing results come online, the number of documented

US cases surge from less than 100 to more than 200,000. It is not until approximately March 14 that widespread lockdowns begin in the United States.

## March 20, 2020

Numerous meatpacking plants throughout the country, including the Sioux Falls Smithfield plant, (responsible for 5 percent of the country's pork production), announce that they will not shut down even as workplace closures are being implemented around the country.

## March 26, 2020

Smithfield Foods confirms its first positive COVID-19 case. It is later revealed that meatpacking plants throughout the country were also beginning to confirm their first COVID-19 cases in late March.

## Early April, 2020

Smithfield officials, in collaboration with state officials in South Dakota, keep the growing number of positive COVID-19 cases among Smithfield Food employees a secret from the public.

By April 8, the South Dakota Department of Health releases statistics showing that over 80 workers at Smithfield Foods in Sioux Falls tested positive for the coronavirus, less than two weeks after the initial case was reported. The facility is now the largest hot spot in the city.

In a press conference held on the same day, Governor Kristi Noem claims, "We believe that the employer is taking appropriate action" in regards to Smithfield.

## April 9-12, 2020

Under immense public pressure, Smithfield opts to close for three days

to clean and sanitize the plant. By April 11, confirmed cases at Smithfield surpasses 230, becoming the largest hot spot in the state. Governor Noem is forced to call on Smithfield to shut down the facility for two weeks.

Meanwhile, a similar situation is unfolding at Tyson's largest US pork plant in Waterloo, Iowa.

On April 12, in a single night, nearly two dozen workers are sent to the emergency room due to symptoms of COVID-19. According to a lawsuit filed by the son of a Waterloo worker who later died of COVID-19, only four days later, "Tyson company officials publicly denied a COVID-19 outbreak at the Waterloo Facility."

Working conditions at the plant are so bad, with workers packed shoulder-to-shoulder in unsanitary conditions, that the local sheriff later declared he was "[shaken] to the core" after visiting the plant.

#### **April 15, 2020**

Smithfield officially becomes the country's largest coronavirus hot spot as cases tied to the plant surpass 640.

Also on April 15, according to the newly-released Public Justice documents, an executive from Perdue Farms, one of the largest pork processing companies in the US, emails CDC director Robert Redfield to thank the agency for offering "to do outreach" to local health departments.

The email reads, in part: "I do think it would help to get in front of some of the health anxiety out there, where it pertains to meat processing. ... We need our local public health authorities to do everything they can to keep the food supply chain operational, and at the same time ensuring the health and safety of employees."

Perdue's communication with Redfield is "a level [of intervention] we hadn't seen before," according to Adam Pulver, an attorney with Public Citizen. "It is troubling to think that CDC would be making decisions based on the pork industry's goals of staying open, not public health."

#### **April 20, 2020**

The Sioux Falls Smithfield plant is finally forced to shut down. The same day, Augustin Rodriguez, 64, becomes the first known Smithfield employee to die from COVID-19. He worked at Smithfield Foods for two decades in the pork cut department.

Meanwhile, Governor Kim Reynolds says she will not order Tyson to close its Waterloo plant.

Throughout this month, at both Waterloo and Sioux Falls, employees were offered a \$500 "responsibility bonus" for not missing a day of work, at the height of virus-spread in the plants.

The conditions at Waterloo and Sioux Falls continue to play out at meatpacking facilities throughout the country in the following months.

#### **April 21, 2020**

In response to the closure of the Smithfield plant, CEO Kenneth M. Sullivan issues a statement warning of a meat shortage. It reads in part: "The closure of this facility, combined with a growing list of other protein plants that have shuttered across our industry, is pushing our country

perilously close to the edge in terms of our meat supply."

#### **April 28, 2020**

President Trump declares meat processing plants "critical infrastructure," in an effort to ensure that facilities around the country remain open under the pretense of looming shortages of pork and chicken.

Playing off the fear-mongering of the food processing company CEOs, Trump claims the recent closures of meat processing facilities "threaten the continued functioning of the national meat and poultry supply chain, undermining critical infrastructure during the national emergency."

In addition to the executive action, which was taken under the Defense Production Act, the Labor Department and OSHA issue "guidance" that would provide additional liability protections for companies seeking to operate amid the risk of outbreaks.

The reopening of the meat industry would now be a state-sanctioned operation. The companies would be given full protection for any worker deaths associated with the reopenings.

#### **April 30, 2020**

According to the Public Justice documents, the USDA considers taking action under the Defense Production Act to mandate the reopening of meat processing facilities.

Two days after the executive order was signed, Steve Censky, the former USDA deputy secretary, writes to USDA staff asking for more information about plant closures "so that we can make a determination of whether we need to issue an order under the DPA to the plant and inform state and local officials of such action."

"While we should continue to try to work cooperatively with the plants and state/local officials to achieve resolution without the need for us to issue an order, the indefinite and two-week closures don't meet that test and are unacceptable," writes Censky.

According to the Food and Environment Reporting Network (FERN) internal talking points prepared for Perdue on April 29 in preparation for the executive order show that the agency was prepared to issue a Defense Production Act order keeping plants open.

Among a series of steps to be taken under the executive order is to "direct meat and poultry processing plants to immediately reopen and resume operations."

#### **May 2, 2020**

In direct response to Trump's executive action, Smithfield officials announce the facility will partially reopen. By now, the Sioux Falls Smithfield outbreak has infected 853 of its more than 3,500 employees.

#### **May 7, 2020**

The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) throws its full

weight behind the decision to reopen the plants. Sioux Falls Local UFCW president BJ Motley declares: “Smithfield is doing everything they can for the employees and their safety. We stand with Smithfield to get this plant back open.”

#### **May 21–22, 2020**

The USDA issues a report on May 21, indicating that the amount of meat in cold storage actually increased from levels reported a year prior, according to recently unearthed documents from the Food and Water Watch lawsuit against Smithfield.

On May 22, USDA’s Foreign Agricultural Service issues its weekly report on meat exports which notes that exports of pork were “up noticeably from the previous week and up 36 percent from the prior 4-week average.” The reports show that there were 2.455 billion pounds of beef, pork, chicken and turkey in cold storage in April 2020, up 2.1 percent over April 2019 levels.

In other words, Trump’s invocation of the Defense Production Act, which was supported by the Democratic Party, is based on a lie. The US was never close to running out of meat supply. Rather, these actions were taken to secure the profits of the meatpacking companies.

#### **Early July, 2020**

Outbreaks continue to spread like wildfire among meatpacking workers throughout the country.

The Arkansas Department of Health reports more than 3,300 confirmed COVID-19 cases among meatpacking workers in the state. At Tyson, whose headquarters are located in Springdale, Arkansas, 13 percent of the workforce has contracted the virus. Statewide, there are 158 poultry workers hospitalized and 18 deaths. The total for the state is over 32,500 cases and 357 deaths.

Through the first two weeks of July, hundreds of meatpacking workers conduct a wildcat strike at the JBS beef processing plant in Greeley, Colorado, the deadliest workplace in the state, with at least eight COVID-19 deaths and 287 workers who have tested positive.

Opposition to the deadly “back-to-work” orders spearheaded by the Trump administration and supported by the Democrats is building among all sections of workers, including autoworkers and health care workers.

#### **Sept. 10, 2020**

OSHA announces that it is fining the Smithfield Packaged Meats Corporation a paltry \$13,494 for “failing to protect employees from exposure to the coronavirus,” a news release states. The fine is the maximum amount allowed by law.

#### **Oct. 2, 2020**

A South Dakota News Watch investigation reveals that the CDC gave

Smithfield a “watered down” set of recommendations.

According to the investigation, the CDC issued a report on the COVID-19 outbreak at the Smithfield Foods plant in Sioux Falls but then retracted that report in order to reissue it with less stringent worker-safety recommendations. The first report was dated April 21, 2020, and included 15 pages of recommendations for improved safety. The second report, issued the next day, included many of the same recommendations, but with added language stating that safety improvements were “discretionary and not required.”

#### **November, 2020**

Charles Taylor of Columbia University and Christopher Boulos and Douglas Almond of the University of Chicago publish a study showing that outbreaks at meatpacking plants were responsible for nearly 8 percent of all COVID-19 cases in the United States during the early months of the pandemic.

The researchers found that by July 21, residents of counties with meatpacking plants had a 51 percent higher rate of infections and a 37 percent increase in death rates. The study also found that meat processing facilities that received waivers from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to increase production line speeds resulted in more county-wide cases.

#### **November 19, 2020**

Isidro Fernandez files a wrongful death lawsuit accusing top Tyson executives of responsibility for the death of his father Oscar Fernandez, who worked in the company’s Waterloo plant. The suit alleges, among other things, that the plant manager at Tyson’s largest US pork plant ran a betting pool with supervisors and managers to wager how many employees would become infected with coronavirus.

The complaint also argues that top management was fully aware of the spread of the virus throughout the plant and other facilities nationwide, but lied to the public and to workers, claiming that no infections had occurred at all.

#### **June 10, 2021**

Under President Biden, OSHA, a division of the US Department of Labor, releases new rules ostensibly made to protect vulnerable workers from the virus. However, the rules, which include an obligation to ensure six feet of distance between workers as well as paid time off “to get vaccinated and to recover from any side effects,” only applied to the health care industry and leaves out all other essential workers.

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The experience in the meatpacking and food processing industry throughout the COVID-19 pandemic stands as one of the starkest expressions of the cruelty and callousness of the entire political establishment toward the working class. Hundreds of meatpacking workers died as a result of these actions. Thousands, if not tens of thousands of additional COVID-19 cases and deaths are linked to the forced reopening of these plants and facilities. Every one of those illnesses

and deaths were preventable.

There is massive opposition among workers in the meatpacking industry who have suffered through the consequences of the ruling class response to the pandemic.

However, what the experience of the last year and a half exposes above all is that meatpacking workers, like all workers, face fierce enemies, not only with the corporate bosses and the political establishment, but also in the UFCW and other unions, which serve big business, not the workers. If a struggle is to be waged to defend both the lives and the livelihoods of the working class, then workers need new organizations, independent of the unions and both political parties.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**