

COVID-19 Sweeping Through US Immigrant Farmworker and Meatpacker Ranks

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"We work shoulder to shoulder. We're very close to each other.... I've had a fever and flu symptoms, but I take Tylenol and keep working." María, worker from Butterball. [Español](#)

On April 7, Tyson Foods announced it was closing an Iowa pork processing plant due to at least 25 of its employees falling victim to novel coronavirus COVID-19. A week earlier, multinational meatpacker JBS cut back production at its meatpacking facility in Pennsylvania for the same reason, joining Empire Kosher and Olymel, who have closed chicken and pig facilities respectively because too many workers have become sick.

Smithfield Foods closed down a pork processing plant in South Dakota this week, and announced Covid-19 has been diagnosed at its North Carolina facility in the town of Tarheel in Bladen County. The county cited privacy issues in its decision not to reveal how many persons have been affected. One employee decided the risk was too great for her to bring the virus home to her asthmatic child. "We are directly on top of each other coming down the line," she said, under condition of anonymity, to a local ABC television affiliate.

On Tuesday, April 21, North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper confirmed that five food processing plants in the state, located in Bladen, Chatham, Duplin, Lee and Robeson counties, have been stricken with coronavirus outbreaks. Workers at chicken processors Mountaire Farms in Siler City and Pilgrim's Pride in Sanford have been complaining for over a week about the contagion, lack of worker protections and workplace pressures such as [threatened termination](#) if they call out sick. Many Latinx employees work for subcontractors at the chicken processing plants, at lower rates of pay and with no paid leave.

The [Farmworker Advocacy Network](#) (FAN) and the [Episcopal Farmworker Ministry](#) (EFWM) in Dunn, North Carolina gathered agricultural workers and advocates virtually via Zoom to give voice to the workers and broadcast the extent of the problem.

The largely immigrant work force is composed partly of H2A seasonal visa holders, tending and harvesting the agricultural fields through the warmer months, and a larger proportion of year round undocumented workers, also working the fields as well as staffing poultry and pork processing factories. The elevated bacterial load experienced by these people already working in close quarters under unsanitary conditions, as well as additional exposure to often carcinogenic pesticides and other chemicals, make farmworkers and meat processors particularly vulnerable to illness.

Migrant and seasonal farmworkers live crowded together in makeshift housing, sometimes

just simple particle board structures with communal toilets. They bus to the fields to perform the backbreaking and dangerous labor employers struggle to find native-born workers to do. Sanitary facilities are almost non-existent. Bathrooms (porta-johns) are only required to be provided if the field is larger than ¼ mile; Norma recounted that while she was told the first field she worked at was too small to have a portable toilet, the second field's toilet, which was servicing forty workers, was out of commission as it had not been cleaned in six weeks.

Meat processors work on the chain, a fast-paced assembly line wherein workers toil side by side repetitively slicing, yanking and hauling pork, chicken, beef and turkey carcasses. "We work shoulder to shoulder. We're very close to each other," explained María, a 15 year veteran with Butterball, the turkey breeder and processor. "I've had a fever and flu symptoms, but I take Tylenol and keep working." While a tenured employee like María has health insurance, she does not get any other benefits. "If we get sick, or are not allowed to work due to the pandemic, we don't get paid."

According to EFM Executive Director Lariza Garzon, "This crisis is highlighting the inequities that workers live through every day. Workers are struggling with a lack of protection at work, concerns about their health, not qualifying for government aid, low wages, poor housing, lack of childcare, fear regarding their immigration status, etc."

The history of immigrant labor and abusive workplaces runs deep in U.S. food production. In 1906, Upton Sinclair published "The Jungle", a book that shocked Americans about the dangerous and unsavory conditions experienced by immigrant workers in the nation's meat packing plants. Almost a century later, in December 2001, the US government [charged](#) Tyson Foods with smuggling immigrants across the Mexican border to work in its plants and providing them with false documentation. In less than two years, the company was [acquitted](#) of the charges, asserting that it was not responsible for the hiring practices of outside agencies, though three Tyson managers opted for plea deals, one of whom committed [suicide](#).

A 2011 [report](#) by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) found that a 40% increase in farmworker pay, bringing annual salaries from \$10,000 to \$14,000 a year, would only increase consumer spending a mere \$16 a year. The author, Philip Martin, Professor of Agricultural and Resource Economics at the University of California-Davis, concluded,

"In short, increasing farmworker wages to raise farmworkers out of poverty poses little threat to consumer pocketbooks or U.S. exports."

Aside from the lack of protective equipment, distancing and other safeguards for agricultural and meat processing workers, shutdowns due to Covid-19 reveal the lack of basic benefits such as sick days and unemployment insurance.

"I work in the fields with tobacco and sweet potatoes, but I've been out of work since February because of the coronavirus," said Flor at the teleconference.

"Since the epidemic, we don't have any work, or very little," added José, a migrant worker who had travelled up from Florida with his wife and children to work the sweet potato and

blueberry fields and has been cutting grass to make ends meet.

“We haven’t received any assistance. With the children at home, we have even more expenses. We earn very little as it is, and the little we have is not enough.”

EFWM Reverend Ann Elliott Hodges-Copple says that due to the pandemic, they cannot make the food deliveries or check on camp conditions as they used to. And their food drives are now swamped. Whereas they used to be attended by 70 to 90 families, the last two have hosted 300 and 220. With no income, no paid leave, no unemployment benefits, no stimulus checks, no health care, no child care, and the possibility of falling ill, the need in the region is enormous.

Tyson Foods Inc., the country’s biggest meat processor, is still not offering paid sick days, but [says](#) it is “eliminating any punitive effect for missing work due to illness.”

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Featured image: A team of immigrant farmworkers clean the remains of a field near Coachella, California. Image: © Robert Gallagher/ZUMA Wire/PA Images

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