

Workers protest against Utah meatpacking plant amid outbreak — 'It's not safe,' says one



(Eli Lucero | The Herald Journal via AP) Rafael Mojica and other JBS workers protest Tuesday, June 9, 2020, in Logan. Hundreds of workers at the meatpacking plant in Hyrum have tested positive for COVID-19.



By Jessica Miller



By Nate Carlisle



By Norma Gonzalez

Published: June 9
Updated: June 09, 2020

Logan • Meatpacking employees and their supporters marched Tuesday in Logan demanding that a company close its Hyrum plant for cleaning and that workers be paid while they grapple with a coronavirus outbreak.

The Bear River Health Department has said 287 workers from the JBS Beef Plant tested positive for the virus at a screening provided to employees the weekend of May 30, which is possibly the single biggest outbreak Utah has seen. Some of those who tested positive on that date have said they have been instructed to report back to work Wednesday.

Meanwhile, there were signs of spread across Cache County. As of Monday, the local health department reported 773 coronavirus cases in Cache County — a one-day gain of 42.

“It’s not safe to work right now,” said one JBS worker and protester who asked not to be identified for fear of losing a job at the plant. The protester said JBS should pay employees full wages while it closes the facility to stop the spread.

SUBSCRIBE DONATE NEWSLETTERS

JBS spokeswoman Nikki Richardson wrote in an email Tuesday that the plant remained partially open. The facility employs 1,400 workers and normally processes 3,500 animals a day.

Richardson said some workers who tested positive May 30 will be returning to work Wednesday as long as they have shown no symptoms for 72 hours. She said that meets guidelines set by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Meatpacking plants have been a source of significant outbreaks throughout the country, largely because of the close quarters in which workers operate as they package meat. President Donald Trump has determined that such facilities are essential, blocking states or local health departments from closing them.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture could shut down the Hyrum plant, but there was no indication it would do so. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue issued a statement Tuesday praising meatpacking facilities and noting they are operating at more than 95% of their average capacity compared with this time last year.

“I want to thank the patriotic and heroic meatpacking facility workers, the companies, and the local authorities for quickly getting their operations back up and running,” Perdue said, “and for providing a great meat selection once again to the millions of Americans who depend on them for food.”



(Eli Lucero | The Herald Journal via AP) JBS

workers protest Tuesday, June 9, 2020, in Logan.

Hundreds of workers at the meatpacking plant in

Hyrum have tested positive for COVID-19.

SUBSCRIBE

DONATE

NEWSLETTERS

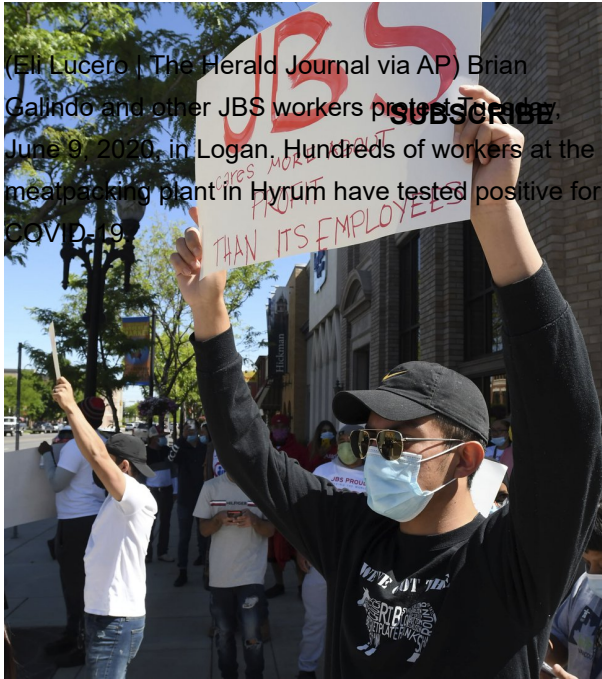
Tuesday's protest began as some of the workers arrived at the JBS parking lot in Hyrum. When their shifts started at 5:30 a.m., they refused to go to work. Videos of the walkout showed workers standing in the lot as the sun rose, some honking their horns.

"Ya no vamos a trabajar la Jente de JBS," one video caption read: "We're not going to work, the people of JBS."

A few hours later, a group of about 30 gathered in downtown Logan with signs written in English and Spanish. Some read, "JBS cares more about profit than its employees" and "I'm risking it for you. Help protect me and my family."

"They are making it seem like money is more important than our lives," said Monique Ramos. "We produce meat for everyone across the country. We deserve to be valued."

'It's unfair'



(Eli Lucero | The Herald Journal via AP) Brian Gallado and other JBS workers protest June 9, 2020, in Logan. Hundreds of workers at the meatpacking plant in Hyrum have tested positive for COVID-19.

SUBSCRIBE

DONATE

NEWSLETTERS

h will be her 13th anniversary working at the e. The Logan couple have tested negative.

th them, and Caballero worries about infecting s the plant to close for three to four weeks to stop paycheck.

“I called [the company] to see if they’d pay us,” Caballero said Tuesday, “but they said no because we weren’t sick; they couldn’t pay us. Only those who were sick. I think it’s unfair because we all have the same rights — sick or not sick — we all have the same rights to be paid.”

One JBS employee, who declined to be identified for fear of reprisal, said in a phone interview earlier Tuesday that her entire household of six people has tested positive for COVID-19 and is battling the symptoms. She and her husband, who are from Mexico and speak limited English, both work at the plant.



(Screenshot via Google Earth) The JBS meat-processing plant in Hyrum. An outbreak of the coronavirus has been linked to the plant in early June.

“We started hearing that people there were getting sick from COVID” in late May, she said. “We always told them to close the company because it was getting more serious. But they don’t care.”

The woman said she and her husband have not worked since because they were instructed to quarantine. They found that they did not received sick pay for time off — which they believed they would. They were paid only for the time they had actually worked.

She said another friend had a COVID-19 test but had a delay of many days before she received the result. The company had her work anyway, because she didn’t show symptoms. The result came back positive.

“And they made her work almost the whole week,” she said. “If some of us die, they don’t care. They just care about production.”

Richardson, the JBS spokeswoman, said employees are being screened for coronavirus symptoms and have been issued personal protective equipment. JBS is following all federal health and workplace safety guidelines, Richardson said, including providing extra spacing for employees and taking extra steps to sanitize the plant.

If employees test positive for COVID-19, they receive short-term disability pay and benefits while they are out of work, Richardson wrote. Employees sent home because they’re in a vulnerable population group are receiving full pay and benefits, she said.

“No one is forced to come to work,” Richardson wrote, “and no one is punished for being absent for health reasons. If any team member is fearful of coming to work, they can call the company and inform us, and they will receive unpaid leave.”

JBS, based in Greeley, Colo., has had significant outbreaks at plants in Colorado, Kentucky, Minnesota, Nebraska, Texas and Wisconsin, according to news outlets in each of those states. On May 27, Reuters reported a labor judge in Brazil ordered a

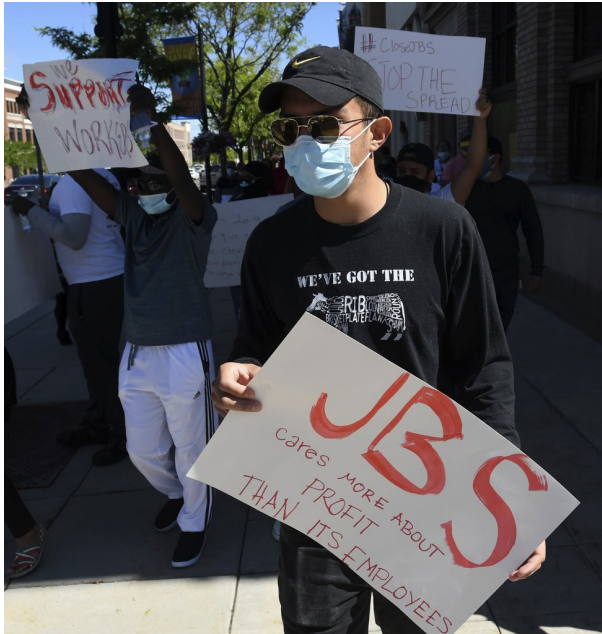
JBS plant there to shut down until all the employees could be tested. The judge, the news agency reported, found more than 60% of all the infections in the municipality of São Miguel do Guaporé originated from that facility.

SUBSCRIBE

DONATE

NEWSLETTERS

'I left crying'



(Eli Lucero | The Herald Journal via AP) Brian Galindo and other JBS workers protest Tuesday, June 9, 2020, in Logan. Hundreds of workers at the meatpacking plant in Hyrum have tested positive for COVID-19.

The number of workers who have tested positive for COVID-19 at the Hyrum plant could exceed 287 because some of the employees sought testing from hospitals rather than the health department.

Another woman who works at the plant with a family member — and who did not want her name used for fear of them both losing their jobs — said she experienced symptoms, including fever, headache, chills and lack of appetite, on May 26.

She said she told her supervisor and asked to go home, but the supervisor said there weren't enough workers. The woman worked a full shift before going to a hospital for testing.

"I may have [infected others]," the woman said Tuesday. "That's why I left crying from work. I told my supervisor, the one that supposedly is in charge of the entire plant, that I was feeling sick. He told me the nurse couldn't see me because he had another person in there."

Nubia Peña, head of the multicultural subcommittee of Utah's coronavirus task force, said the panel is working with a Latino advocate in Cache County to provide 500 masks for the workers and their families. More masks will be provided if needed.

"The subcommittee also has leaders within the faith-based community who are working to bolster the grassroots food security initiative to ensure families in need won't go hungry," Peña said in a statement. "Organizers are relying on donations from the community, but the subcommittee will work with state partners and faith leaders to support efforts that are culturally mindful of the fear families are experiencing."

— Reporter Lee Davidson contributed to this report.



FEATURED COMMENTS



75
GFY2

Not when the supply of hamburders is threatened.
Covfefe!



88
Weston Journey

If this outbreak results in deaths, and it probably will, and the owners of the plant knew they were being imprudent, and they probably did, they should be held liable for the deaths.
I got a nickel says the plant owners are tRumpies.

[View all 21 comments](#)



jmiller@sltrib.com

Follow @jm_miller

[Donate to the newsroom now.](#)



natecarlisle@sltrib.com

Follow @natecarlisle

[Donate to the newsroom now.](#)

SUBSCRIBE

DONATE

NEWSLETTERS



ngonzaletz@sltrib.com

Follow @normacatalina12

[Donate to the newsroom now.](#)

