

April 16, 2020

LETTER TO THE POULTRY INDUSTRY ON PROTECTING WORKERS DURING THE COVID-19 EPIDEMIC

Our organizations represent workers, activists, health and safety experts, and lawyers, who together advocate for the dignity and prosperity of workers who process and package our nation's poultry.

Our country is struggling through the global COVID-19 pandemic. During this unprecedented emergency, we write to highlight the essential contributions of the 250,000 women and men who work in the US poultry industry. They keep us fed – during crisis and normal times – but are too often overlooked and undervalued.

These workers' and their families' health and financial stability must be unequivocally prioritized in recognition of their human rights and dignity, as well as their essential role in keeping our food system running during this emergency. While continuing to ensure a steady supply of goods, companies should immediately adopt the following measures:

Paid leave: Almost all corporations in the poultry industry are large enough to be exempt from the provisions of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act. Without access to paid leave, workers cannot afford to comply with recommendations for self-isolation if they are exposed or experiencing symptoms.

- Companies need to provide **at least two weeks of fully paid sick time** to cover workers who:
 1. **are ill with COVID-19;**
 2. **have COVID-19-like symptoms, and are seeking a medical diagnosis;**
 3. **are subject to a federal, state, or local quarantine or isolation order related to COVID-19;**
 4. **have been advised to self-quarantine by a health care provider;**
 5. **are caring for a child whose school/childcare has been closed or for whom childcare is unavailable due to COVID-19; or**
 6. **are caring for an individual who is under quarantine (or in isolation) related to COVID-19 in accordance to order by public officials; or following advice of a health-care provider.**

Workers who are caring for their child whose school/childcare has been closed or for whom childcare is unavailable due to COVID-19 need to be provided with **at least 10 weeks of 2/3 paid family leave.**

Health and safety measures: Sanitation and safety protocols, as well as production line speeds, need substantial changes without delay to protect workers from exposure to COVID-19. For the sake of workers, communities, and continued food production poultry plants should follow all guidelines as issued by the CDC. **Whenever it is not possible to abide by the six-foot physical**

distancing guideline, enhanced protective equipment or physical barriers must be put in place.

- Companies should consult with authorized worker representatives to receive recommendations from workers about all options for improving safety during this time, including spacing out workers on production lines and slowing line speeds. If needed, additional shifts can be added to meet production and compensate for fewer workers per shift.
- Temperature checks for fever should be conducted at facilities' entry points. **Workers should be compensated for the additional time spent doing these temperature checks.** Records resulting from this system should be carefully maintained, and subject to privacy as any other medical records. However, individuals can transmit COVID-19 without symptoms, and therefore temperature checks alone are insufficient protection.
- Hand washing stations should be easily accessible for all workers, and hand sanitizer available at all-times; worksite should be disinfected regularly.
- Companies should provide additional protective equipment.
 - Workers at all departments should receive new gloves after every break and as needed throughout their shifts
 - Workers should be provided with the most appropriate masks available; and plastic barriers if working in close proximity to others is absolutely unavoidable.
- Work tools should not be shared among workers.
- Bathroom breaks (and shift changes) should be staggered to comply with physical distancing public health norms.
 - The numbers of floaters should be increased in order to ensure enough coverage to properly implement this staggered rotation
- Lunch breaks should also be staggered, and breakrooms need to provide ample space for government-recommended physical distancing.
- Parts of the plant, or the entire plant, need to be shut down when there is a confirmed COVID-19 exposure. Workers need to be notified if they might have come into contact with an infected individual.

Premium pay for essential work:

- Workers should be compensated for the additional risks they face while continuing to work in large processing plants. This values their sacrifice and dignity as essential workers, and also will help ensure that production can remain constant during this time of need.
- At a minimum, workers should receive Pandemic Premium Pay of at least time-and-a-half for all hours worked until the crisis is over.

Job protection:

- Workers who need to take leave due to COVID-19 exposure or illness--or due to family care obligations related to the epidemic--must have their ability to return to the same jobs at the same rate of pay until the CDC determines the public health emergency has abated.

Worker voice and worker engagement:

- During a time like this it is **vital for companies to be engaging with their workers.** Workers have the most immediate knowledge about conditions in the plants and about what is needed to protect workers' health. Workers are on the front line and their engagement is critical in helping to stop transmission of COVID-19 disease. Recognizing this principle is essential to also protect the communities where the plants are located.

- No worker can be retaliated against for reporting signs or symptoms of illness; demanding protective equipment; seeking assistance from the government, worker centers, or unions to obtain such equipment; or refusing to work in an unsafe or unsanitary environment.
 - If requested by pregnant workers and workers with underlying medical conditions (vulnerable workers), provide reasonable accommodations so they do not have to put their health at risk.
- Plant managers need to engage workers through union representatives; health and safety committees; and worker center advocates to understand workers' concerns; and to ensure that **communications plans during this crisis must be clear, efficient, and reach all workers in their preferred language.**

Once the COVID-19 pandemic has passed, the industry and government should maintain and improve upon the benefits outlined in this letter. Poultry workers are essential workers, now and always, and they deserve these basic protections. In addition, there will be other outbreaks, and the poultry industry needs to be resilient and prepared for them.

In the meantime, our organizations will continue monitoring this ongoing crisis and we urge all industry leaders to follow these recommendations. We welcome dialogue with corporate executives and with interested stakeholders.

Please direct any comment or questions to Alex Galimberti (alexandre.galimberti@oxfam.org) and Kameron Dawson (kdawson@abetterbalance.org)

SIGNED:

A BETTER BALANCE

CATA, The Farmworkers Support Committee

CENTER FOR PROGRESSIVE REFORM

CENTRO DE DERECHOS LABORALES (Bryan, TX)

GREATER MINNESOTA WORKER CENTER

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

INTERFAITH WORKER JUSTICE (IWJ)

LEGAL AID JUSTICE CENTER

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH (COSH)

NEBRASKA APPLESEED

OXFAM

RETAIL, WHOLESALE AND DEPARTMENT STORE UNION (RWDSU), UFCW

SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER (SPLC)

UNITED FOOD AND COMMERCIAL WORKERS INTERNATIONAL UNION (UFCW)

WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA WORKERS' CENTER