

# RWDSU

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## **POULTRY INDUSTRY'S DELAYED COVID-19 RESPONSE IS KILLING AMERICA'S ESSENTIAL WORKERS - PROTECT THEM NOW**

(NEW YORK, NY) – Today, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), which represents thousands of poultry processing workers across the southern United States, condemned the industry for its slow response to COVID-19.

Over the past month, the RWDSU has been imploring poultry industry employers like Tyson Foods, Equity Foods, JBS/Pilgrim's Pride, Koch Foods and Wayne Farms to implement critical standards to protect workers' safety and to secure the food supply chain. The industry's response for the most part has only been recent, sporadic and limited to a few locations, leaving most workers unprotected - despite months-long demands from the RWDSU. Poultry workers at their plants have been dying.

For small towns like Albany, Georgia, it's too little too late. Albany has the second largest outbreak of COVID-19 in Georgia. The town is home to workers from a number of nearby poultry facilities that feed Americans across the country. This community, like much of the South, will face an uphill battle when it comes to protecting its residents from COVID-19. Many suffer from long-term health issues, including respiratory issues, which have proven fatal when the virus is contracted.

At the Tyson facility in Camilla, Georgia, where the RWDSU represents 2,000 members, two members have died from the virus and many are sick or in quarantine. Tyson employs a largely black workforce that commutes from Albany, Georgia and surrounding cities to the facility daily. Workers debone chickens elbow to elbow with no access to masks. They work at speeds of upwards of 80 chickens per minute, while upper management, largely white and clad in protective gear, oversees production.

Sadly Camilla, Georgia, isn't the only place affected. Shelbyville, Tennessee; Carthage, Mississippi; and other communities across the South are suffering due to Tyson's delayed distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) to workers and the delayed implementation of social distancing protocols, protective barriers, and staggered start times and breaks. Perhaps most astonishing, the company offered workers a \$500 bonus, but the bonus is tied to attendance and won't be paid out until July. Workers deserve a no-strings attached bonus now and premium pay for the additional risks to their health and the health of their families as they ensure continuity of our nation's food supply for all of our families.

While the company has pledged to do better, and has started this week to share PPE with workers, put up protective barriers at some facilities, and pledged to pay union workers for time in quarantine, the fact is it's too little too late. Workers are dying. This is inexcusable for America's largest meat producer, which

makes \$40 billion in annual revenue. Yet, Tyson is just one example of an industry that is acting too late to protect a generation of workers that is feeding America during this crisis.

The RWDSU represents workers across the entire U.S. supply chain, including food processing at iconic American household brands like Quaker Oats, General Mills, Post, Gerber, and Coca-Cola, to name a few. Outside of the poultry industry, those companies seem to be getting it right with a few outliers, ensuring workers have the space they need, premium pay, and PPE.

The poultry industry as a whole is getting it wrong, and the consequences of its slow response are fatal for too many RWDSU members.

**Stuart Appelbaum, President of the RWDSU issued the following statement on the industry:**

“Our union members are heroes. They are feeding America during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they need to be protected. The poultry industry’s response is too little too late for our members. Day after day we hear reports of our members contracting the COVID-19 virus and even succumbing to it. We won’t stand for that and neither should the giants of the poultry industry.

“We are in the middle of a pandemic. The poultry industry can and must do better to swiftly protect workers. It is outrageous that managers have had masks and other protective equipment for weeks while workers, who work elbow to elbow every day, don’t.

“Saying you are still scrambling for protective supplies when much of the supply chain has been protecting workers for weeks is a pathetic excuse for companies that make billions in profits annually. Our food processing members are the backbone of the supply chain in this country; and cramming them into poultry facilities with no protection is a death march, and it’s inexcusable.

“While some facilities are putting up barriers now, too many workers have already been infected and are suffering the consequences. The RWDSU is demanding the industry implement standards to put an immediate stop to this. Without swift action by the industry, our members will continue to die.”

**The RWDSU’s Regional Council Presidents, which represent workers in poultry processing also called on the industry to act swiftly:**

“What’s happening in Camilla, Georgia is a clear example of how not to do things. It’s too little too late here, and I hope sharing our story will help stop other communities from being exploited by corporate America. Our members have been pleading with the company for weeks, and the company has done nothing here. When I speak to our members I hear real fear in their voices, and their voices must be heard. The poultry industry can and must act now,” **said Edgar Fields, President of the Southeast Council of the RWDSU, which represents 10,000 workers across the southeastern United States, many in food processing and distribution.**

“Our members are scared, plain and simple. These are members who we routinely meet with at all hours of the day and night, and in this crisis we cannot hold them. What we can do though, is fight. The RWDSU is fighting to ensure that the tens of thousands of workers we represent in the poultry industry are treated with dignity and respect in this crisis. Our members are on the front lines, and their health and safety is critical, not just to them and their families, or the communities they live in, but to our entire nation’s food supply. The poultry industry needs to step up and treat their workers as heroes right now,” **said Randy Hadley, President of the Mid-South Council of the RWDSU, which represents 15,000 workers across the southern United States, in food processing, distribution, and healthcare.**

***The RWDSU demands the poultry industry take swift action:***

- The poultry industry has both a contractual and legal responsibility to provide a safe and healthy work environment for its employees. The RWDSU intends to ensure that its companies comply with their legal and contractual obligations in this regard.
- Accordingly, facilities must notify the RWDSU, local representative union and workforce immediately when an employee tests positive for COVID-19. The companies need to provide:
  1. The department(s) and shift(s) worked by the employees testing positive for COVID-19. This is a continuing request for information if other employees test positive for the COVID-19 virus.
  2. The names of all employees who worked in those department(s) and shift(s) on days when the COVID-19 positive employees last worked.
  3. The date or dates last worked by the employees testing positive for the COVID-19 virus.
  4. Number of workers who failed the temperature check and were sent home. These workers should be paid at their regular rate of pay.
- In addition to the requested information, the RWDSU demands that the poultry industry take the following actions in order to protect the health and safety of workers at all poultry facilities.
  1. Immediately shut down for a minimum of 72 hours the department(s) in which the COVID-19 positive employees worked and clean and sanitize the department in accordance with CDC recommended guidelines. Workers in these departments should be paid at their regular rate of pay during the duration of the cleaning.
  2. Pursuant to CDC guidelines, require that any employee who worked in the same department(s) and shift(s) with the COVID-19 positive employees quarantine for 14 consecutive days. The RWDSU demands that the employees be paid during this period of quarantine at their regular rate of pay.
  3. Provide proper PPE for all employees including but not limited to gloves, masks, face shields, smocks and other appropriate PPE in order to prevent any transmission of the COVID-19 virus.
  4. Install Plexiglass shielding between workstations, especially on the deboning lines where poultry companies are currently forcing employees to work shoulder to shoulder without proper PPE.
  5. Employers should set a schedule to ensure that all frequently touched surfaces are sanitized on a regular basis during the work day.
- As this pandemic grows and wreaks havoc to our states, cities and communities, it takes great courage for workers to leave the safety of their homes to go to work, and in so doing, ensuring continuity of the nation's food system. All essential workers deserve premium pay. It is absolutely perverse at this time to tie bonus or additional pay benefits to attendance.
- Furthermore, vulnerable members of the workforce with underlying health conditions or over the age of 60 should be given the choice to take paid leave and not jeopardize their lives at this critical time.

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The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) represents 100,000 members throughout the United States. The RWDSU is affiliated with the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW). For more information, please visit our website at [www.rwdsu.org](http://www.rwdsu.org), Facebook: [RWDSU.UFCW](https://www.facebook.com/RWDSU.UFCW) Twitter: [@RWDSU](https://twitter.com/RWDSU).