

Fruit pickers, garment workers strike as opposition grows to reopening US economy

By Jerry White
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Strikes and other job actions by workers demanding protection from the deadly COVID-19 disease continue to spread around the United States, even as the Trump administration, state governments and giant corporations push for a rapid reopening of the US economy.

Over the past several days, migrant fruit packing workers in the state of Washington, garment workers at a Mississippi pillow factory, and workers at a private trash hauling company in New Orleans have walked out over the dangers they face.

According to the web site Paydayreport.com, there have been over 200 strikes and other job actions in the US since the beginning of March. The website aggregates information from local news outlets about the strikes, which have been largely ignored by national news media.

Like similar struggles in France, Germany, Mexico, Brazil and other countries, the strikes in the US involve workers from a wide array of industries and public services. In all of these struggles, however, workers are insisting on their right to live and protect their loved ones from the disease, which has already claimed nearly 300,000 lives worldwide, and over 85,000 in the US.

Fruit picking and processing workers

“Farmworkers are essential, not disposable,” “We are human,” “No more slavery” and “We need protections,” declared signs in Spanish and English carried by workers who have gone on strike at four Yakima Valley fruit packing houses in the state of Washington, about 150 miles southeast of Seattle.

The strike started last Friday when workers walked out of an Allan Bros. facility in Naches after 12 workers tested positive and the company tried to conceal it from them.

The workers, who were joined this week by workers at three other fruit packing plants—Jack Frost in Yakima and Matson and Monson, both in Selah—are demanding a \$2 per hour hazard pay raise along with protective equipment and safe working conditions.

The workers who package apples, pears and cherries say the companies are violating six-foot social distancing guidelines and are allowing infected workers to come back to work. Many farmworkers sleep in cramped rooms, with several bunk beds,

and travel to the fields in tightly packed busses.

There have been several outbreaks of the disease among farmworkers in Washington state, New York, North Carolina and California, including in Monterey County, a major lettuce producer known as the “Salad Bowl of the World,” where nearly one out of four of those infected is an agricultural worker. Although they are deemed “essential workers,” the Trump administration has lowered the minimum wages for workers with migrant visas, cutting already poverty-level wages by \$2-5 an hour.

Meatpacking workers

Opposition to deadly conditions continues to grow in the meatpacking industry, where at least 12,000 workers have tested positive and at least 48 have died, according to the Food and Environment Reporting Network, or FERN.

After a wave of strikes and other job actions in Georgia, California, Iowa, Nebraska and other states forced the shutdown of scores of plants, Trump invoked the Defense Production Act to order their reopening. In the week after Trump’s action, the virus spread at more than twice the national rate in US counties with major meatpacking plants, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

Last Wednesday, 20 workers walked out of a poultry plant in West Columbia, South Carolina. “This is a safety hazard,” Anthony Furman, a worker at the House of Raeford plant, told local station WLTX. “We’re around each other inside this plant and we’re not six feet away.”

The company “is treating us like slaves,” worker Naesha Shelton added.

A Johnsonville plant in Holton, Kansas was closed Wednesday after five workers tested positive. Dr. Drew Miller, a family physician in Lakin, Kansas told the Associated Press that infected meatpacking workers were exposing “their parents or others living in their house that have other chronic illnesses.” He added, “It is an eerie thought, but as everybody else talks about reopening, it still feels like we’re looking COVID-19 straight in the eyes.”

Garment workers

Three hundred garment workers, mostly African American

women, walked out of a north Mississippi pillow factory Monday morning after a coworker tested positive and management sought to cover it up.

The walkout at the Brentwood Originals plant occurred after a worker said her husband—who also works at the factory—had contracted the disease. Rather than warning workers, the supervisors concealed the information, later telling workers that it was because they had not seen any medical reports about the infected worker.

Carolyn Vardaman, a worker at the plant for four years and mother of six who said she could lose her job for speaking up, told the local Fox News affiliate: “Because people are dying from this and it seems to me that you have to speak out...If it has to be me, okay, I love my life.”

The walkout in Mississippi follows last month’s job action by garment workers at American Apparel in Selma, Alabama. The workers sew facemasks for US soldiers but have been denied the masks to protect themselves from infection. Other struggles in the South include the ongoing strike by New Orleans sanitation workers.

Autoworkers

Anger is growing among more than 150,000 autoworkers who are being forced back into GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler factories in Michigan and other states by May 18 after a seven-week shutdown.

With the backing of the United Auto Workers, skilled trades workers and team leaders have been sent in to prep the plants, but several have already been sent home after contracting the disease.

According to a WXYZ 7 Action News report, at least two team leaders working inside Fiat Chrysler’s Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) in suburban Detroit have been sent home.

One worker, Tina, told reporters that both workers who were sent home tested positive. “So now we have 3,000 people coming back,” she told reporters. “What do you think is going to happen? We’re going to have a freakin’ outbreak here.”

At least 22 Fiat Chrysler workers have died since March, including at least three at SHAP. The factory was one of several FCA plants in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and Windsor, Canada where workers downed tools in defiance of management and the UAW, forcing the closure of the North American auto industry in mid-March.

Now the UAW is claiming it is safe to return to the plants even though workers will not be tested—in contrast to top UAW officials who will be tested before returning to their cushy offices.

A worker at GM’s parts distribution warehouse in Burton, Michigan who resumed work on Monday told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “They have sent home a few people at the door for coughs, without pay. Another girl yesterday had a high temperature of 102, they sent her to medical, but there was no

staff working during our shift. They had her sit and wait for 45 minutes, tested her with another heat gun, and said her temperature went down, so they sent her into our department with no reason given.

“Our break rooms are marked off for social distancing, so now there are no places for people to go during breaks or lunches. We have to stand outside. All this shows it’s too soon to operate efficiently, on the workers’ side of things.”

A Kentucky Truck Plant worker in Louisville, where Ford is bringing 12,000 workers back to its two plants, told the WSWS, “It is not safe at all to return. They aren’t thinking about life and safety of people. Their justifications for the reopening are financially driven, and their motives are to increase profits at the sacrifice of our lives and those of our families.”

The Trump administration has blocked the release of CDC guidelines on reopening businesses, ended on-site federal safety inspections in response to worker complaints of unsafe conditions and management coverups, and is moving to lift any legal liability from companies that sicken and kill workers. State governments are threatening to strip unemployment benefits from any worker who refuses to come back to an unsafe workplace.

Amidst mass unemployment and social distress, the ruling class is exerting enormous pressure on workers to return to nonessential factories and other workplaces. The aim is to pump out the profits needed to cover the immense growth in government and corporate debt generated by the multitrillion-dollar Wall Street bailout.

In opposition to the gang-up of the corporations, both big-business parties and the corrupt unions, workers must organize rank-and-file safety committees to oppose the reckless reopening of nonessential workplaces and demand full income and medical benefits to all affected workers until the pandemic is contained.

At the same time, essential workers in health care, food production, and logistic workers at Amazon, UPS and other companies must be guaranteed protective gear, universal testing and a safe working environment overseen by rank-and-file safety committees working in conjunction with public health care experts.

The growing resistance of workers in the US must be unified with workers throughout the world and guided by an international and socialist perspective and program, including the transformation of the giant banks and corporations into public utilities controlled by the working class.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>