

# **A WORKERS GUIDE TO MEATPACKING**

**Southern Workers Assembly**  
**June 2020**

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<http://southernworker.org/meatpacking>

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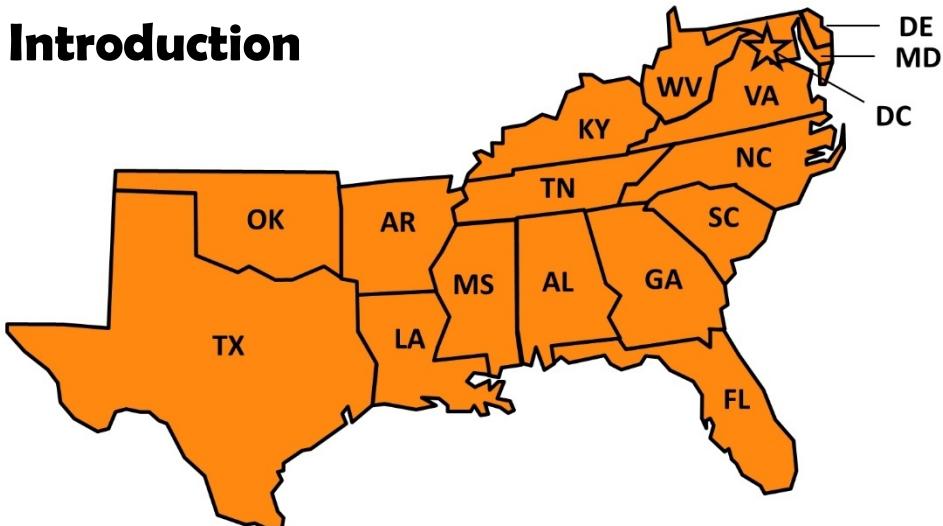
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# Introduction



“Safe Jobs Save Lives” “Medicare for All” “Organize the South”—Southern Workers Assembly fights across the Southern US.

We are the Southern Workers Assembly. We fight for better working conditions—health, wages, respect, justice, and unionization across the US South. Our focus is the workplace. And we join those fighting for justice on other battlefronts. Our main slogans: Safe Jobs Save Lives. Medicare for All. Organize the South. Repeal Right to Work. If you don't have a union, fight to get one. If you have a union, fight to make it fight.

People in the US are hooked on meat, especially fast food hamburgers and fried chicken. Meat goes to grocery stores and restaurants at all price points. But few outside of meatpacking know what workers go through today to produce this meat, or what the meat industry is all about. And even in meatpacking, we're too isolated. This pamphlet is a start to getting on the same page and changing things for the better.

Meat work has long been a life and death issue. But COVID takes it to another level. Backed by federal orders, the meat industry is forcing people to work without any protection from the devil virus that is killing us!



# Texas leads the nation in meatpacking

Texans are:

13% Black vs 13%

nationwide

40% Latinx vs 18%

42% White non Latinx vs 60%

17% Foreign born vs 14%

Median household income \$59,570  
vs \$63,179

15% in poverty vs 12%

20% without health insurance vs 10%

7% of all non-farm jobs are in manufacturing vs 9%

41% of people over 25 did not go to college vs 45%

**28 meat and poultry processing plants**

**11,660 workers**

West Dallas:

Family members

and local activist

Carlos

Quintanilla of

Acción America

told the public

on April 28 that

Quality Sausage



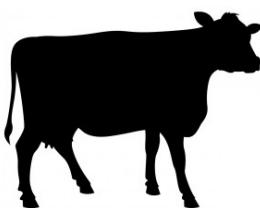
“accelerated production” in response to worker absences due to illness and fear. The company also failed to inform workers on COVID19 cases in the plant. This was after two workers, Hugo Dominguez and Mathias Martinez, died of C19. Both men were in their 30s.

# 1. What is meatpacking?

Upton Sinclair's 1906 book *The Jungle* explained the grim reality of meat work to millions. Activists turned his readers into a force for change, but mostly for better meat, not better jobs. Workers tackled that, and big gains were made. And lost. The fight continues and with COVID is even surging forward.

People in the United States generally eat beef from cows, pork from pigs, poultry (chicken and turkey), and seafood (fish and shrimp). Meatpacking involves killing these animals, removing skin, feathers, blood and bones, cutting a carcass into marketable sizes, and packaging it for the grocery store or restaurant. Meatpacking is “disassembly line” production. **Forty years ago, the line in a beef slaughterhouse moved 175 cattle per hour. Now the line often exceeds 400 per hour.**

Cattle are large animals raised on ranches. Cows are raised in three stages, usually at three different sites: calves (up to 350 pounds), adults (up to 600 pounds), and then fattening (up to



1,000 pounds). Meat workers use captive bolt guns and sharp knives to stun and kill each cow, then power saws and other knives for cutting. Meatpackers produce 60 different cuts of beef.

Pigs are smaller animals raised under one roof for their entire lives, often in small pens. A pig is slaughtered at 250 pounds, in much the same way as cattle. Each carcass is cut in half, then further sliced into four basic cuts: shoulder, loin, belly and ham. Every part of the pig is turned into a packaged commodity, even nose, feet and tail.

Chickens and turkeys are also raised under one roof, from small chicks to the fattening process. Plants are smaller and more numerous but no less dangerous: hot in some areas, cold in others, foggy air, wet greasy surfaces, sharp knives and hooks, close quarters, tiring repetitive work, and high speed lines.

# North Carolina

22% Black  
vs 13% nationwide

10% Latinx vs 18%

63% White non Latinx vs 60%

8% Foreign born vs 14%

Median household income \$52,413 vs \$63,179

14% in poverty vs 12%

13% without health insurance vs 10%

11% of all non-farm jobs are in manufacturing vs 9%

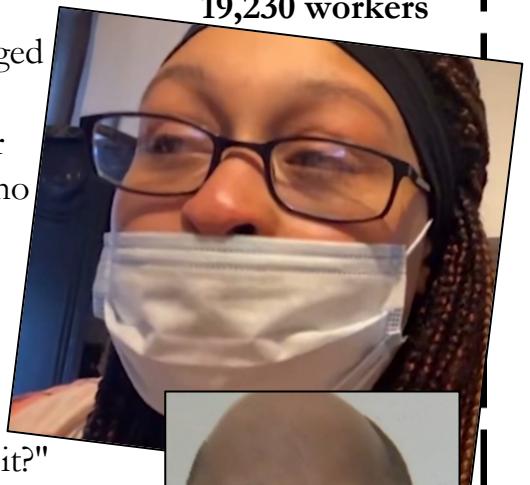
37% of people over 25 did not go to college vs 45%

**49 meat and poultry processing plants**

**19,230 workers**

By late April COVID19 emerged at the Smithfield plant in Tar Heel. Terry Brooks got it after close work with two others who tested positive. Pregnant mother of two Sacha Bettis also got sick. "I'm never away from my kids so I automatically started thinking what if my kids have it?"

Using worker privacy as an excuse, the company refused to talk about C19 in the plant. "It's greed and poor management," said Terry. "The place needs to be closed down. Everybody needs to be tested, like they did in South Dakota." They spoke from quarantine by videoconference.



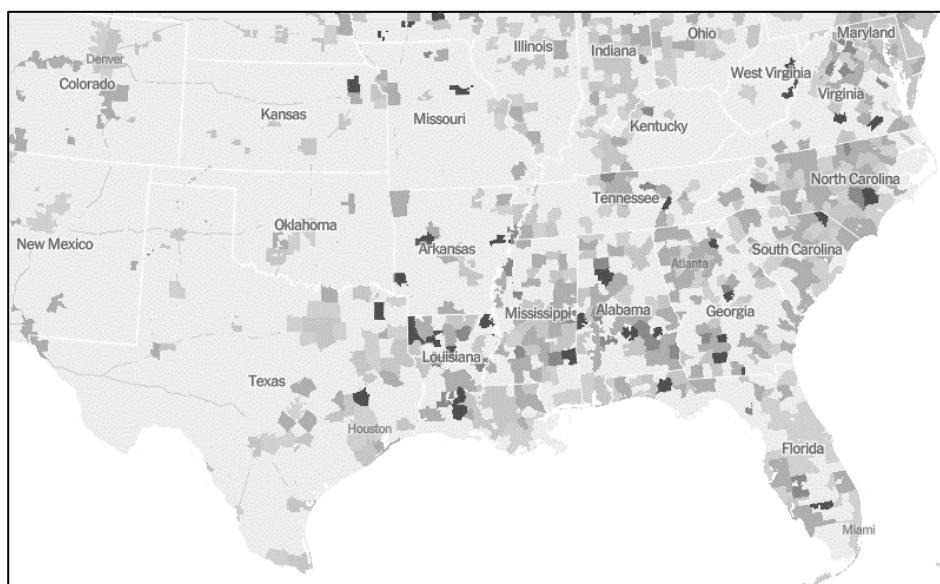
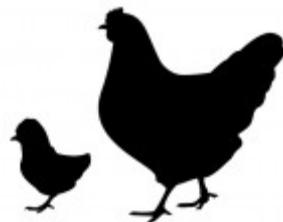
## 2. Where is meatpacking?

People eat meat everywhere, and it is processed in every state, but not the same way or at the same scale. Beef, pork, and chicken are each a case of monopoly capitalism; a few firms dominate.

Tyson has plants in 27 states, including 16 plants in Arkansas and 11 in Texas. Smithfield is in four Southern states: Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia. JBS is the most widespread across the South, in 11 southern states: Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia.

What's more, many plants are in rural areas or small towns, far from large hospitals and other resources.

Communities are often divided on social distancing and masks, as well as color and nationality. The map shows C19 (and meatpacking) hotspots as of May 28.



As of May 28, the darkest counties are COVID hotspots. By and large they also mark the locations of beef, pork or chicken plants.

## Georgia

32% Black vs 13% nationwide

10% Latinx vs 18%

52% White non Latinx vs 60%

10% Foreign born vs 14%

Median household income \$55,679  
vs \$63,179

14% in poverty vs 12%

16% without health insurance vs 10%

9% of all non-farm jobs are in manufacturing vs 9%

40% of people over 25 did not go to college vs 45%

**45 meat & poultry processing plants, 15,360 workers**



At least 40 Perdue Farms Cook Plant workers in Kathleen walked out March 25, angry and worried about COVID19 in the plant. “We’re not getting nothing—no type of compensation, no nothing, not even no cleanliness, no extra pay—no nothing. We’re up here risking our life—for chicken,” said Kendaliyn Granville. “Just sanitize the plant.” Based on evidence workers saw, the company was lying about cleaning. The plant employs 600 who make an average of \$12.66/hour. Perdue called sheriffs, who surrounded the workers and forced them and the media to disperse. So they FaceTimed. In 2015 Perdue was worth \$3.2 billion. Meanwhile in early April, four Tyson plant C19 deaths unfolded in Camilla, Eloise Willis, Mary Holt, Annie Grant, and one more, amid worker complaints.

### **3. Who owns meatpacking?**

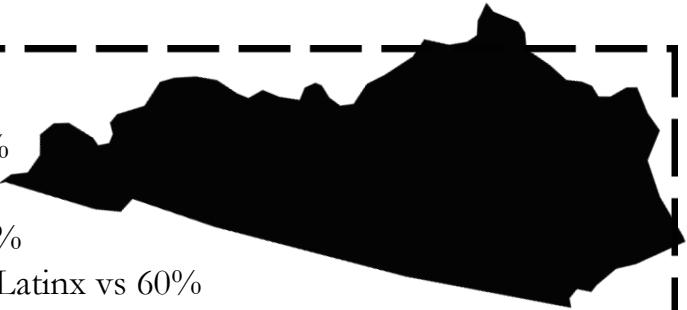
Industry consultant Cassandra Fish says that 50 plants do 98% of the slaughtering and processing. Meanwhile the US Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service counts 670 beef slaughtering/processing facilities, 611 in pork, and 252 in chicken. So there is a "long tail" of many small facilities. But by market share, a few giants dominate. They run the North American Meat Institute. They pay the lobbyists. They have generations of experience and control, handed down within families. They include privately held corporations and publicly traded stocks. And they are not all in the US.

Company	Beef	Pork	Chicken	Ownership
Tyson	✓	✓	✓	Family
Cargill	✓			Family
JBS	✓	✓	✓	Brazilian
National Beef / Marfrig	✓			Brazilian
Smithfield / WH Group		✓		Chinese
Hormel		✓		Family Trusts
Sanderson Farms			✓	Family
Perdue			✓	Family
US Market share of above	85%	65%	60%	

The Big Eight supply well over half of all meat consumed in the US.

Tyson is the domestic power in US meatpacking. The family that started it with one chicken farm in 1931 owns it now. Cargill, started 1865, is the largest privately held corporation in the United States. It is owned by the Cargills and the Staceys. Hormel is still owned by descendants of George Hormel through multiple family trusts. Sanderson started as a family farm in 1947. Perdue started in 1920; it is family owned. Smithfield/WH Group in China, led by billionaire Wan Long who entered the business in 1968 and National Beef/Marfrig, led by founder/billionaire Marcos Antonio Molina dos Santos, and JBS led by two billionaire Brazilian brothers Joesley and Wesley Batista, sons of the founder, round out the meat moguls.

## Kentucky



8% Black vs 13% nationwide

4% Latinx vs 18%

84% White non Latinx vs 60%

4% Foreign born vs 14%

Median household income \$48,392 vs \$63,179

17% in poverty vs 12%

7% without health insurance vs 10%

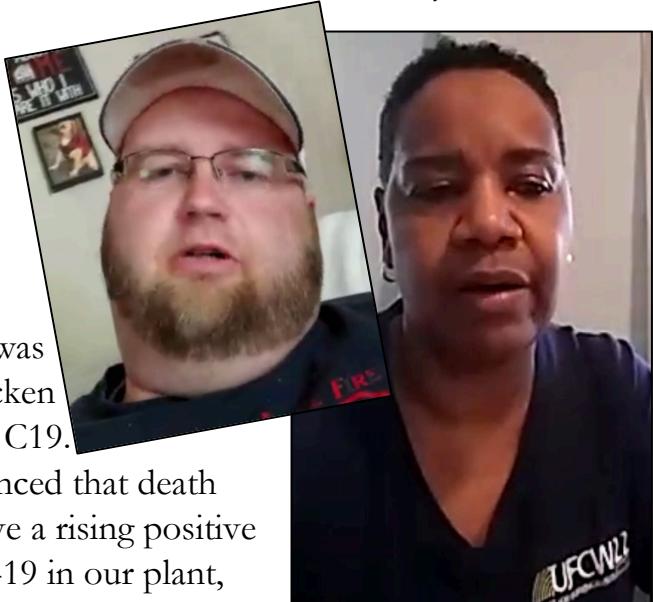
13% of all non-farm jobs are in manufacturing vs 9%

46% of people over 25 did not go to college vs 45%

**41 meat and poultry processing plants**

**2,510 workers**

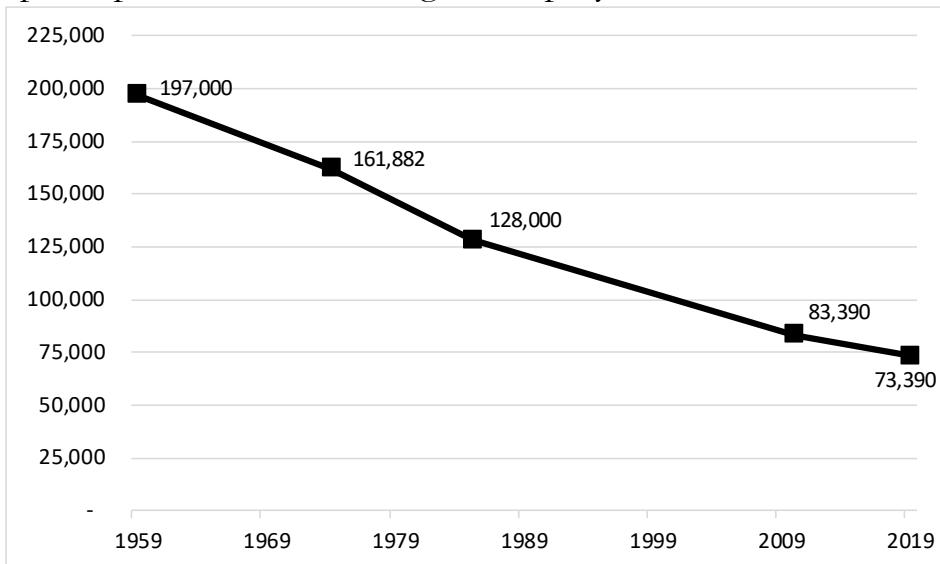
Darlene Davis, worker and UFCW 227 chief steward at Louisville's JBS chicken plant, spoke about her co-worker who was the first KY chicken worker to die of C19.



The state announced that death April 4. “We have a rising positive case of COVID-19 in our plant, and the company is not sharing this information with our members.” In Robards, the union put out the word when Tyson hid its first C19 case. Worker and chief steward Jason Wilson said that right away, “the members got united and more unionized than I’ve ever seen in my life at this plant.” His co-workers speak five different languages, including Karen/Tibetan.

## 4. Who works in meatpacking?

Slaughtering animals and cutting the carcass into cookable pieces used to be a high-skilled job—butcher. Then came industrial meatpacking. To make more money, owners deskilled the process to where many people each do intensive repetitive tasks on an assembly line. And with speedup and new technologies, employment has declined.



Profitseeking by speedup and new technologies are driving the fall in packer jobs.

Government statistics from 2003 report workers as 32% white, 20% African American, and 46% Latinx; 26% are foreign born. In 2005 Pew Research Center reported 20% of meat workers as undocumented. According to the UFCW immigrants make up 50% of the workforce. Gender stats are not available.

The poultry workforce once based on African American women is now based on Latinx. As one plant manager explained, “When I came to Gainesville [TX], I couldn’t see a Mexican on the street. But now when you go, all you see are Mexicans … at the beginning, we had only white folks. Then blacks. Then Vietnamese people. They are mostly gone … now we have Hispanics.” Companies sort different ethnicities by pay grade and task, which keeps the workforce divided.

## Tennessee

17% Black vs

13% nationwide

6% Latinx vs 18%

74% White non Latinx vs 60%

5% Foreign born vs 14%

Median household income \$50,972 vs \$63,179

15% in poverty vs 12%

12% without health insurance vs 10%

11% of all non-farm jobs are in manufacturing vs 9%

44% of people over 25 did not go to college vs 45%

**40 meat & poultry processing plants, 4,380 workers**



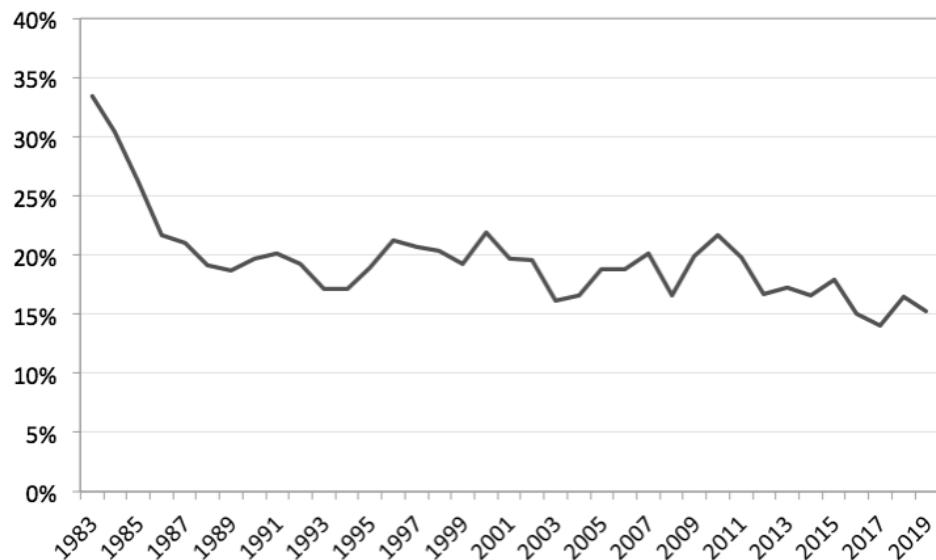
Shelbyville's Tyson chicken plant did a weekend cleaning in late April after 79 people out of a workforce of 1,000 tested positive for C19. With Trump using the Defense Production Act to order plants open, workers were then forced back to save their jobs. Randy Hadley, president of the Retail, Wholesale, Department Store Union Mid-South Council, represents workers there. "Our members lives are more important than President Trump having a damn piece of chicken on his table at night. We have to be safe to feed the nation."

## 5. Are meatpackers unionized?

The Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America formed as an AF of L affiliate in 1897. In 1937 the CIO organized the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee that became the United Packinghouse Workers of America in 1943. In 1979 UPWA and Retail Clerks merged into the United Food and Commercial Workers. In 1980, about 46% of meatpackers were unionized. Today that's 15%.



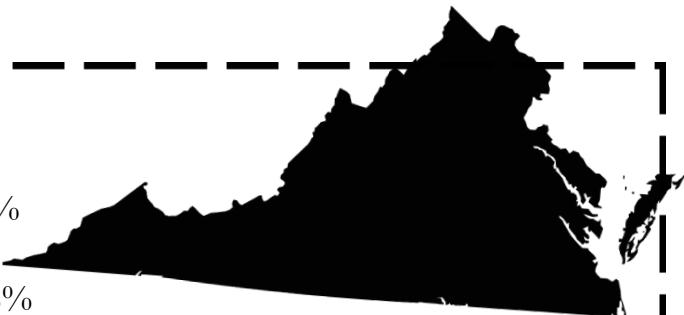
The UPWA formed with a fighting spirit for worker rights, justice for African Americans, and equality for women workers. Two of their most famous organizers were Charlie Hayes, first trade unionist elected to Congress, and Addie Wyatt, founding member of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists and Coalition of Labor Union Women.



In 1983 close to 35% of all meat workers were unionized. Today that's 15%.

Some Teamster locals have organized meatpacking plants. These companies hire union busting firms to fight against all forms of worker organizing, including calling on ICE to threaten immigrant workers.

## Virginia



20% Black vs 13% nationwide

10% Latinx vs 18%

62% White non Latinx vs 60%

12% Foreign born vs 14%

Median household income \$71,564 vs \$63,179

11% in poverty vs 12%

10% without health insurance vs 10%

6% of all non-farm jobs are in manufacturing vs 9%

34% of people over 25 did not go to college vs 45%

**35 meat and poultry processing plants**

**4,720 workers**



On April 27 Accomac's Perdue chicken plant workers declared themselves #EssentialNotDisposable. UFCW Local 400, VA Organizing, Community Solidarity for Poultry Workers, and the VA Interfaith Center joined them in a 50-car assembly. Horns blared outside the plant. There on the Eastern Shore 50% of C19 cases come from Perdue and Tyson, which employ 3,400 workers. Accomack County cases tripled in a week. Said Felicia Matthews, "We are calling on Perdue to close the plant for two weeks for a deep cleaning and pay employees during that entire time."

## **6. Can you make a living wage in meatpacking?**

It depends: Do you own the company or work there? Do you work full or part time? Do you work above or below the average hourly wage in the meat plant: \$14.23?

Chairman John Tyson	\$ 10,285,992
CEO Keith Cargill	\$ 4,144,219
Chairman and CEO Joe Sanderson	\$ 4,147,890
Meat plant worker, average	\$ 29,600

Annual compensation in meatpacking. The owner of Tyson makes 347 times the wage of an average meat worker. What do you consider a livable wage?

And how does meat work compare to other manufacturing wages? Meat workers used to make 14 to 18 % more than the average manufacturing worker. Today meat work pays 44% below the average, which is close to half the average pay.



## Arkansas

16% Black vs 13% nationwide

8% Latinx vs 18%

72% White non Latinx vs 60%

5% Foreign born vs 14%

Median household income

\$45,726 vs \$63,179

17% in poverty vs 12%

10% without health insurance vs 10%

13% of all non-farm jobs are in manufacturing vs 9%

47% of people over 25 did not go to college vs 45%



**31 meat and poultry processing plants**

**9,570 workers**



As of May 24, known meat plant C19 cases in Arkansas totaled 37—with 9 at Tyson and 16 at Ozark Mountain in Rogers. Protesters are demanding sick benefits and company transparency on C19. The company was just testing workers for fever, letting C19 spread via asymptomatic cases. “We know there’s gonna be more this week because workers who called this morning said that they have symptoms, but they are punished for missing work,” said Magaly Licoli. Protests are ongoing.

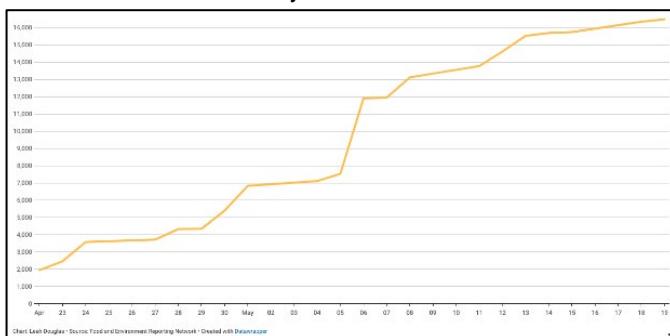
## 7. Are meatpackers healthy?

Meat workers bring and develop great strength to cope with the work, but NO, meatpacking work is not healthy! It is one of the most dangerous jobs in manufacturing:

1. In 1999 25% of all workers were injured on the job
2. 42% of workers in one SC plant have carpal tunnel
3. Workers in MD and VA 32 times more likely than their community to have E. Coli infections
4. Nationwide 750+ amputations from 2010 to 2017
5. More respiratory ailments, chemical burns, fractures, concussions, eye damage, sprains, strains, concussions, and exposure to toxic fumes

Today meatpacking plants are one of the main hot spots for COVID19. The Food and Environment Reporting Network reports that as of May 29, 245 meatpacking plants have had 20,033 workers test positive and 79 people have died. FERN also found that “during the pandemic, meat companies:

- Pressured workers to show up for work even after they were exposed to the virus.
- Failed to provide workers personal protective equipment until well into the crisis.
- Lacked access to hand washing and sanitation supplies.
- Stopped testing workers for Covid-19 when, worker advocates say, numbers soared.”



Covid cases in the meat industry are rising; this graph is just one month of numbers for meat and food processors and farmworkers, from April 22 to May 19.

# Florida

17% Black vs 13% nationwide  
26% Latinx vs 18%

54% White non Latinx vs 60%  
21% Foreign born vs 14%

Median household income \$53,267 vs \$63,179

14% in poverty vs 12%  
16% without health insurance vs 10%

4% of all non-farm jobs are in manufacturing vs 9%  
40% of people over 25 did not go to college vs 45%

**30 meat and poultry processing plants**

**3,690 workers**

Sign in a South Florida store.

Due to High Demand,  
there will be a purchase  
limit of 1 unit of each  
Fresh Meat item per  
Member.

Beef - Limit 1  
Pork - Limit 1  
Chicken - Limit 1

*Bulk sales will not be fulfilled.*

As of May 5, Florida governor Ron DeSantis has not been willing to follow CDC guidelines to combat COVID19, but meat workers are out sick in such numbers that plants are shut or production slowed. “The plants don’t have people,”

said one distributor, “and these are highly trained people,” plants can’t just hire someone else. Tyson has had to shut down three plants and said its beef supply has been threatened due to workers being sick. Pork processing was cut down by 50 percent—chicken and beef are also hard to find in stores. South Florida has seen a reduction in.

Florida has many immigrant workers who are among the most vulnerable to C19, living in close quarters, without health insurance or sick pay, and working essential jobs.

## **8. Does government regulate meatpacking?**

After the national revelations of *The Jungle*, by Upton Sinclair (1906), the federal government under President Teddy Roosevelt took action. That same year Congress passed two bills: the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act. This legislation was not to protect the workers, it was to protect the meat!

The Nixon administration established the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in 1970. OSHA and the Center for Disease Control have collaborated in establishing guidelines for controlling the COVID virus in meat plants. These are voluntary not mandatory guidelines, so companies are free to do as they please.

Over three years (2015-2018) the Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) received 770 reports of amputations, in-patient hospitalizations, or eye loss about meat and poultry plant workers.

Last year OSHA employed only 875 compliance officers, the fewest safety and health inspectors in its 48-year history. The Trump administration did not hire a single new compliance officer in its first full budget year. The AFL-CIO found one OSHA inspector for every 77,908 workers.

There are 6,500 field inspectors of the Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service. They are organized by the American Federation of Government Employees. Several hundred of these inspectors have been infected by the COVID virus and a handful have died.

President Trump issued an executive order for all meatpacking plants to open as essential parts of the economy. This order does not address the health issues of the workers or the meat inspectors. It is an anti-worker pro-company order.

## Mississippi

38% Black vs 13% nationwide

3% Latinx vs 18%

57% White non Latinx vs 60%

2% Foreign born vs 14%

Median household income \$43,567

vs \$63,179

20% in poverty vs 12%

14% without health insurance vs 10%

13% of all non-farm jobs are in manufacturing vs 9%

44% of people over 25 did not go to college vs 45%

**29 meat and poultry processing plants**

**7,330 workers**



**MAC EPPS**  
CONCERNED ABOUT SAFETY OF POULTRY WORKERS

Chicken plant workers contacted local media WLBT with concerns and a reporter interviewed Mac Epps of Mississippi MOVE, friend and relative of several workers. He said people were

exposed and yet told to work without being tested: "They are afraid to miss work... afraid they're gonna get in trouble." Tyson and Peco issued general C19 statements in response. Worker fears may relate to last year's ICE raids in the state instigated by Koch Foods. Koch was found guilty of racial and sexual harassment and fined \$4 million; their retaliatory call to ICE got 680 people arrested. Protests defending the workers broke out all over the country.



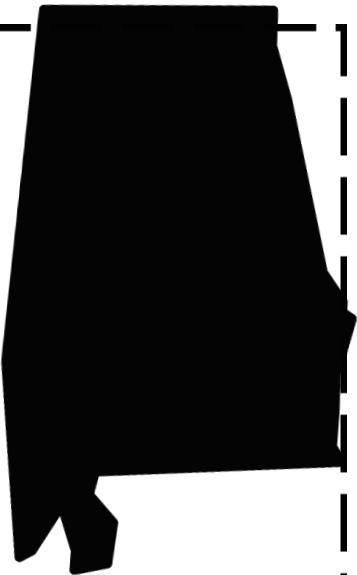
## **9. What role does technology play?**

There are at least seven major stages in the technological development of meatpacking: cutting tools, barbed wire, railroads, trucks and highways, assembly lines, computers, and robotics.

1. Animals have skin and feathers that have to be removed to get at the meat they contain. The technology of meatpacking takes off with the development of knives and meat cleavers.
2. A national economy depends on being able to move commodities throughout a country. Railroads enabled meat to be a key part of the national economy, especially when refrigerator cars were developed.
3. After the Civil War barbed wire became the tool used to transform the land of the plains into commodities. This private ownership led to vast cattle ranches.
4. The assembly line was invented in meat packing in the 1870s. It was actually disassembly as it was breaking an animal down into small pieces. Henry Ford reversed it into an assembly line to build cars. Butchering was deskilled into simple repetitive tasks in meatpacking plants.
5. The development of the USD highway system meant that trucks could transform the meat supply chain into every country. The modern meat economy was born.
6. As with all major corporations the use of computers enabled them to organize their operations on a global just in time basis. This covers accounting, corporate communications, inventory control and production issues, and the control of its labor force.
7. The next major stage is the introduction of robotics as a labor replacing development. Both Tyson and JBS are leading the way by investing and buying robotics firms to restructure meat production. This is a future battle we face.

## Alabama

27% Black, vs 13% nationwide  
4% Latinx vs 18%  
65% White non Latinx vs 60%  
4% Foreign born vs 14%  
Median household income \$48,486  
vs \$63,179  
17% in poverty vs 12%  
12% without health insurance vs 10%  
13% of all non-farm jobs are  
in manufacturing vs 9%  
44% of people over 25 did not go to college vs 45%



### 27 meat & poultry processing plants, 14,950 workers



In April Wayne Farms in Albertville reported 75 cases and one death. That same month the company received permission to increase production speed from 140 chickens/hour to 175. In March labor advocates had asked regulators to mandate worker protections against infectious diseases. Instead, the feds relaxed oversight.

Amber Souphwick de-skins, splits breasts, and checks for bones. She feels a “sense of dread … I don’t want to go in but I need to because I still have to work to pay bills.” She blames the company for its C19 hotspot. Family members have pre-C19 illnesses. Top image, a worker dressed for the line at Wayne, before the extra protections from C19.

## **10. What role does community play?**

All workers live in communities and belong to families, congregations, sports teams, and more. What happens to workers happens to the community. This is especially true with this devil virus epidemic.

If the community is to help workers, workers and their unions have to help the community. It's a two way street.

And so the Southern Workers Assembly has two slogans.

1. As workers we say Safe Jobs Save Lives
2. As community members we say Medicare for All

Now is the time for all people of good will to find ways to unite and fight for justice and equality.

We have to raise fundamental questions:

Can we continue to let big corporations run society like they do meatpacking?

Can we continue to let the rich get richer and the poor get poorer?

Can we continue to have a health care industry but no universal health care system?

Can we continue to let the corporations exploit and mismanage our brothers and sisters who come from Mexico and Latin America?

Of course there are more questions. Share your questions, and share your answers too.

**Get in touch with the Southern Workers Assembly. Unity is strength. Now is the time for solidarity.**



# Maryland



31% Black vs 13% nationwide  
10% Latinx vs 18%  
51% White non Latinx vs 60%  
15% Foreign born vs 14%

Median household income \$81,868 vs \$63,179

9% in poverty vs 12%

7% without health insurance vs 10%

4% of all non-farm jobs are in manufacturing vs 9%

34% of people over 25 did not go to college vs 45%

**23 meat and poultry processing plants**

**700 workers**



As of April 30, high numbers of Maryland and Delaware poultry workers are out sick with

COVID19. As a result, several chicken farms will kill two million chickens instead of getting them processed for grocery stores and restaurants serving takeout. The workers are mainly Haitian immigrants, fearful for their health but reluctant to protest because of the threat of ICE and deportation. Cut-up chicken is hard to find and the media is asking people to switch to whole chicken.



## A new kind of killing ground

“Management began with beard nets, the equivalent of a fishing net on your face. As the deaths mounted, they turned to basic facemasks and plastic face guards that barely reach workers’ noses and which they must reuse and clean themselves. With workers just inches apart and sometimes face to face, these measures are unlikely to stop the spread. It is probably impossible to make a meatpacking plant Covid-safe, at least without medical-grade equipment and a substantial slowing and reorganization of the work. Without these measures, keeping plants open will jeopardize the lives of workers and their under-resourced communities. Last week, I asked a friend who still works at the factory whether management had instituted any additional safety measures. “According to them,” she replied.

Still, the Covid era has had one unintended benefit: a new device for workers to clock in and out of bathroom breaks has been postponed, deemed unsafe by Covid-minded and media-shy authorities.

When I left the factory in North Carolina, my coworker Leticia instructed me to “tell people about the humiliations we experience here.” She also pleaded, “could you leave us a labor union?” Almost ten years later Leticia still works at the plant. I recently reminded her of her parting words. “We are a ball of scaredy cats here,” she lamented. A few days later, Vincent, her African American coworker, reached out to tell me he was sick with Covid. He wanted me to tell our friends at the factory, who he has worked with for a decade, so they would demand to be tested and let off work. “We are like family,” he said, even though he could barely communicate with Latinx workers across the language barrier. As Donald Trump mandates that meatpacking plants stay open, the American public must demand more for workers like Leticia and Vincent. If they don’t, slaughterhouses will become a new kind of killing ground.” —*Vanesa Ribas*

College teacher Vanesa Ribas worked in a NC meat plant.

## South Carolina

27% Black vs 13% nationwide

6% Latinx vs 18%

64% White non Latinx vs 60%

5% Foreign born vs 14%

Median household income

\$51,015 vs \$63,179

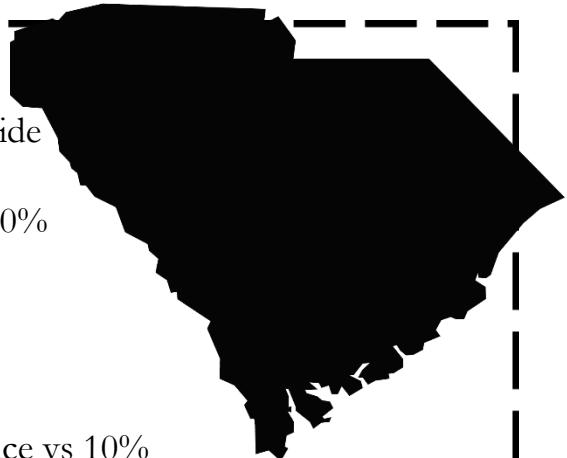
15% in poverty vs 12%

13% without health insurance vs 10%

12% of all non-farm jobs are in manufacturing vs 9%

42% of people over 25 did not go to college vs 45%

**20 meat & poultry processing plants, 5,050 workers**



In West Columbia on May 6, at least 20 House of Raeford poultry workers walked off the job to save their lives; COVID19 is spreading in the plant. Raeford gave out a document saying they were essential workers, but refused to pay hazard pay or discuss working conditions. Workers were fired on the spot. As Naesha Shelton said, "We're being treated like slaves." Anthony Furman said of social distancing on the job, "We're one foot away!" UFCW Local 1996 called it a wildcat strike but said they would back the workers. House of Raeford is family-owned; plants in four states rely on 5,500 workers.

# **Read this pamphlet in a group**

We know work better than anyone else. We are the truth of what goes on in any industry. We think about it. We talk about it. A group read of this pamphlet will organize everyone's knowledge and improve everyone's public speaking. How else will our truths get into other people's heads, even the media? How else will things change?

Schedule as many sessions as you like. Expect people to drop in and out. Just try to hear from everyone present. And forward motion is the key.



## **Suggested agenda**

- A. Set an end time for the session.
- B. Read a page out loud, taking turns on each paragraph.
- C. Go around the group with each person giving a comment or question. Talk through each one or just go around and save further comments for later.
- D. Discuss one or more of the questions below.
- E. Set next session date, time, and place.

## **Discussion questions**

1. How does work in the meatpacking industry compare with other industries?
2. What happens before, during and after a workplace protest that makes each phase a success?
3. Why is the meatpacking-COVID situation a case of class struggle—a struggle to transform the capitalist system?
4. Should we connect better to the Southern Workers Alliance, and if so, how?

# Oklahoma

8% Black vs 13% nationwide

11% Latinx vs 18%

65% White non Latinx vs 60%

6% Foreign born vs 14%

Median household income \$51,424 vs \$63,179

16% in poverty vs 12%

17% without health insurance vs 10%

8% of all non-farm jobs are in manufacturing vs 9%

43% of people over 25 did not go to college vs 45%

**10 meat and poultry processing plants**

**2,040 workers**



With 25 years  
of work at

Guymon's Seaboard Foods. Felix Jimenez. died of C19; his wife and sons, all with C19, also worked or work there, mourning their father. By late May the plant was a C19 hotbed, with 641 of 2,700 workers testing positive. So far the UFCW union leadership is not protesting, but the plant accounts for more than half of the county's C19 cases. The county hospital has 25 beds. Overwhelming the hospital is almost certain, because 70% of workers live in the county. Plus they speak the languages of five continents. The company was earlier convicted of recruiting undocumented workers from 2012 to 2017 and paid a fine of \$1,000,000.

# **May 2020: SWA on ‘Get back to work!’**

On April 28, Workers Memorial Day — a day the labor movement commemorates workers who have died on the job — and while the U.S. tops a staggering 61,000 deaths related to COVID-19, President Donald Trump utilized his powers under the Defense Production Act to order meat and poultry processing plants to stay open.

Meat processing plants are COVID-19 hotspots of infection. This is another move which prioritizes corporate profits over the lives of workers, many of whom are Latinx, African American and immigrant.

More than 150 of the largest U.S. meat processing plants operate in counties — many in rural areas of the U.S. South — where the rate of coronavirus infection is already among the country’s highest. Rates of infection around these plants are higher than those of 75 percent of other U.S. counties. The South is also a region where many of the governors are calling for workers to return to work, representing a strong base of anti-working-class racism and political conservatism.

While the bosses claim the industry has thus far maintained sufficient production, union leaders have pointed out that 20 workers have died, and at least 5,000 meatpacking workers and 1,500 food processing workers have been directly impacted by the virus at 48 plants. Those in the South are impacted by industrial pollution that is unregulated, effecting the health of millions and making them more vulnerable to COVID-19. Meatpacking and slaughter companies can be found in every state in the South.

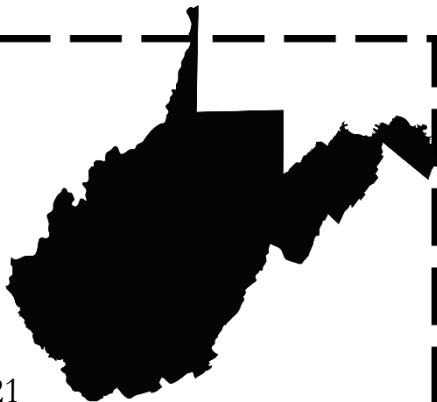
With the Trump Administration and Congressional Republicans blocking OSHA from issuing a rule protecting essential employees during COVID-19, workers say they have little choice but to take matters into their own hands. Meat packing workers all over the country, working in freezing cold rooms and unable to practice social distancing, have staged walk-outs demanding work place safety from Kathleen, GA to Timberville, VA.

Meatpacking Workers in the South Need to Unite, Organize and Struggle!

## **Join the Southern Workers Assembly’s Safe Jobs Save Lives Campaign**

- Don’t Go to Work without a solid agreement that guarantees testing, monitoring, PPE, separation of work stations, 100% health care family coverage for virus treatment.
- If you don’t have a union, form a workers committee right away and open up discussions with management on these issues and depending what they say and do, move to take protective collective actions
- We call upon other workers and the general public to support packing workers with a Boycott of brands that refuse to abide by Safe Jobs-Saves Lives mutual agreements.
- Connect with other workers in industries and employment sectors in the Safe Jobs Save Lives Campaign by contacting [info@southernworker.org](mailto:info@southernworker.org) and <http://southernworker.org>

## West Virginia



4% Black vs 13% nationwide  
2% Latinx vs 18%  
92% White non Latinx vs 60%  
2% Foreign born vs 14%  
Median household income \$44,921  
vs \$63,179  
18% in poverty vs 12%  
8% without health insurance vs 10%  
6% of all non-farm jobs are in manufacturing vs 9%  
52% of people over 25 did not go to college vs 45%

**10 meat and poultry processing plants**

**970 workers**



The fight against  
COVID19 in WV's

meat plants has not broken into the media yet. But Pilgrim's Pride houses three plants within Moorefield's city limits, a town of 2,500 in Hardy County. The plants employ 1,700 workers. There is no union. As of August 2019, the plants were processing an average of 450,000 chickens daily, up to 2.2 million birds per week. Low wages and harsh working conditions result in local workers refusing to take these jobs so the company recruits immigrant workers. As a result workers are from Myanmar (formerly Burma), Vietnam, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Guatemala and elsewhere. Eighteen different languages are spoken in county schools.

## **Aug 2019: SWA on the Mississippi raids**

On August 7, the US Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) conducted raids on workers in 7 food processing plants in six Mississippi cities.

These workers came to the US to try to earn an honest living, because conditions in their home countries prevented them from living in peace, supporting their families and endangering them by military and social violence and climate changes. US foreign policies in Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa contribute to the conditions faced by the majority of these immigrant workers.

The families, communities and cities that depend on the incomes of these workers are being disrupted representing a form of ethnic cleansing consistent with the demands of white nationalism.

Although the ICE representatives claimed that this mass raid was not ordered by the Trump administration, it fits the racist and xenophobic lies that immigrants are taking U.S. jobs. These mass raids are part of Trump's white nationalist claim of bringing back U.S. jobs.

This raid is not only a violation of human rights that needs stronger language in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is also an attack on the working-class, aimed at fostering greater divisions and fears. It is part of the corporate strategy to create a climate of insecurity within the working-class to super-exploit immigrant and all Southern workers.

The US South has attracted large numbers of Latinx workers. Along with African descendants and Indigenous people the combined amount of people of color in the South is about 40 percent of the population of 108 million. What capitalism does to its most oppressed and exploited sectors sets a direction for capitalism's plans for the entire working-class.

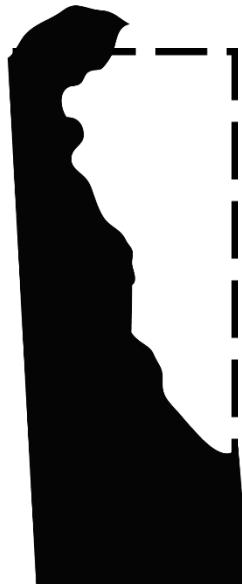
Organized labor and working-class communities in the South, nationally and internationally must show solidarity with these workers. They must know that they are not isolated and are part of the workers struggle.

The Southern Workers Assembly calls on all member organizations, all workers in the labor movement and communities dependent on the working-class to take some solidarity action to express solidarity with these workers and our outrage at the actions of the federal government.

Please send feedback on what action your organizations can take based on your capacity. If taken in your organizations name, add "member of SWA" to show the mobilization of our network.

## **Delaware**

23% Black vs 13% nationwide  
10% Latinx vs 18%  
62% White non Latinx vs 60%  
9% Foreign born vs 14%  
Median household income \$65,627 vs \$63,179  
13% in poverty vs 12%  
7% without health insurance vs 10%  
6% of all non-farm jobs  
are in manufacturing vs 9%  
43% of people over 25 did not go to college vs 45%



**6 meat and poultry processing plants**

**5,780 workers**



Sussex County leads the nation in chickens sold for food in the U.S.—and leads Delaware in C19 cases. 150 out of 300 workers tested in one local plant were found to be positive, the tip of the iceberg. Haitians and Latino immigrants dominate the workforce, and fear that testing or treatment will leave their families without income or even deported. “Because of this crisis, everything that hasn’t been addressed before is exacerbating,” said Erika Gutierrez, Latino outreach coordinator for the Delaware Campaign for Achievement Now. Tight housing makes it impossible to quarantine from family members; 80% of county Latinos live in poverty.

## Louisiana

33% Black vs 13% nationwide

5% Latinx vs 18%

59% White non Latinx vs 60%

4% Foreign born vs 14%

Median household income

\$47,942 vs \$63,179

19% in poverty vs 12%

4% without health insurance vs 10%

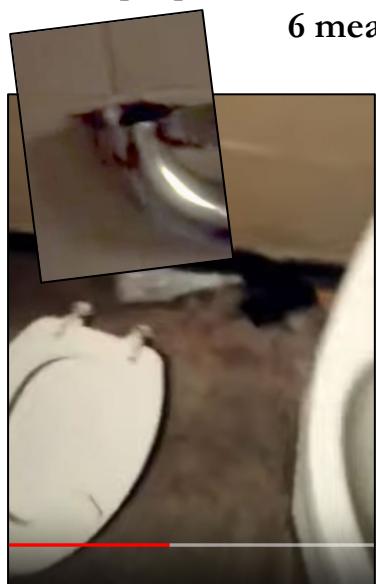
7% of all non-farm jobs are in manufacturing vs 9%

49% of people over 25 did not go to college vs 45%



### 6 meat and poultry processing plants

**3,730 workers**



A long-gone liquid soap container and a broken toilet seat documented in video by a prisoner-worker at DG chicken plant in Morehouse Parish.

Workers at the DG Foods poultry plant in Bastrop, population 10,000, have to use a dirty bathroom with standing water on the floor, soap missing from dispensers, and seats ripped from toilets and thrown onto the floor. About 40

prisoners from the Ouachita Parish sheriff's office Transitional Work Program facility are sent to work there every day, and as of May 28 family members are raising concerns, such as "Some days they get masks, some days they don't." Both the plant and the prison are C19 hotspots. Unsanitary conditions reflect company attitudes towards workers and prisoners.

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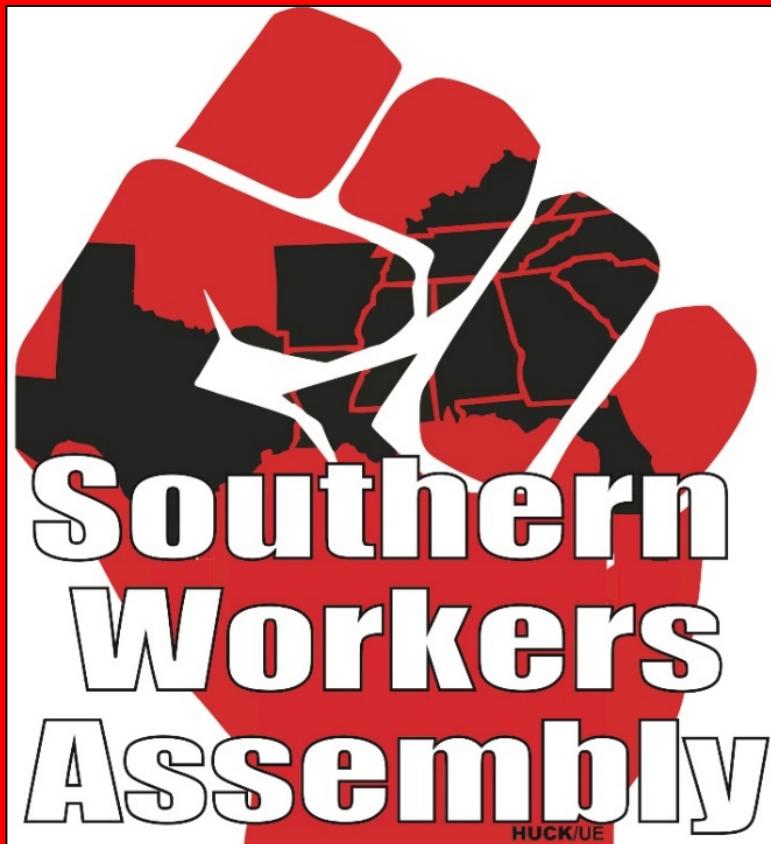
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