



## Testimony of Magaly Licolli

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The Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis

Hybrid hearing on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on essential workers in America's meatpacking industry and their communities.

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Good afternoon, members of The Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis. I'm grateful for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Magaly Licolli, I represent Venceremos, a worker-based human rights organization in Arkansas that works to ensure the dignity of poultry workers. Having worked directly with numerous poultry workers at several plants in Arkansas the past seven years, I have heard firsthand from the very beginning of the pandemic how poultry companies exposed workers to contracting and dying from COVID.

Arkansas is home to five Fortune 500 companies, including Tyson Foods. Yet, the state has the sixth highest poverty rate in the U.S. With almost 30,000 workers, poultry processing is the fifth largest employer in the state and is responsible for more than 10% of US poultry meat processing. The locus of production is in northwest Arkansas. This region has a high concentration of foreign-born Hispanic/Latino immigrants, and many are employed in the industry alongside significant numbers of Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, and white workers. Together, these are the people who ultimately transform the chickens grown on Arkansas farms into the drumsticks, cutlets, and prepackaged meals that are sold to consumers through corporate supply chains.

I began advocating for poultry workers in 2014 because I met former poultry workers who used to work for Tyson Foods and other poultry companies, who were unemployed because they had suffered accidents in the plant that left them injured for life. Rather than supporting or indemnifying them, these companies discarded the workers injured in their plants. I saw how these workers struggled to find resources to survive, and how their communities remained in the shadows.

Women poultry workers founded Venceremos with me because they had experienced first-hand abuses from the poultry industry. Venceremos was born with the idea that to fix longstanding abuses, workers must be part of the solution. Only through hearing their voices and ensuring their participation can working conditions truly improve and become more humane.

When the pandemic hit the U.S. in January 2020, poultry workers immediately knew they were at higher risk for contracting the virus because they work extremely close to each other and without meaningful protections. I remember when a Tyson worker fearfully asked me: "We work extremely close to each other, what will happen to us? What can we do?" Between March and April of last year, poultry processing volumes [dropped by 12 percent](#). There were [numerous outbreaks](#) at meat processing plants, [leading](#) to 6,500 cases and 20 deaths among meatpacking workers. There were widespread closures of facilities owned by JBS and Smithfield. The CEO of Tyson Foods placed [full-page ads](#) in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* pleading that "the food supply chain is breaking" and that Tyson's "plants must remain operational." In response to this meat-processing crisis, former President Trump issued an [executive order](#) declaring that meatpacking plants must stay open during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the government declaring meat packing workers essential in April 2020, neither the government nor the companies followed through on their public promises to protect workers' health and safety. For example, OSHA never enforced its own COVID19 guidelines for meat processing companies. Therefore, workers felt completely abandoned and unprotected, as they were unable to file complaints with OSHA that would result in an inspection once they fell sick and COVID began to rampage through meat packing plants and communities.

By keeping processing plants open, ignoring some or all worker-protection requirements, and simply relying on new workers to continuously replace those infected and killed by a disease whose spread we knew how to prevent, it was clear that the industry, and the administration preferred to sacrifice worker lives for the sake of the bottom line.

Tyson Foods and other poultry companies didn't act immediately to prevent the spread of the virus, and responded only when their public image began to take a hit and it was too late for thousands of workers. The [first case of COVID-19](#) in the U.S. occurred on January 2020. In March, we had to organize calls to action and an online campaign targeting poultry firms Tyson Foods, George's Co, Simmons Food, and Cargill, demanding essential protections. We gathered over 50,000 signatures. Workers from Tyson Foods, and George's plants in Springdale, AR organized over 300 workers to sign a worker petition, and two rallies to deliver the petitions. It wasn't until April 23 of 2020, after more than [5,000 cases](#) had developed among meat processing workers, that Tyson finally provided its line workers with personal protective equipment.

However, their response to worker demands and negative press were mostly public relations crisis management that [did little to actually protect workers](#). For instance, the scanners that Tyson installed to screen workers for COVID-19 were strictly for show because such devices can't detect asymptomatic cases. Instead of implementing well known actual preventive measures, spelled out in [CDC guidelines](#), such as distancing workers, partitions don't work unless workers are six feet apart, and they need to be in front of the worker. The workers I spoke to say that Tyson [complied incompletely](#) or not at all, and that any social distancing practices and such measures did not extend to other common areas such as break rooms and restrooms. This made it clear that measures that would cost the companies money or slow the output of plants were off the table, and further illustrated the low value these companies placed on their workers' lives and wellbeing.

During that time, we inevitable saw the first big COVID outbreaks at various poultry plants throughout Arkansas. I remember receiving many daily calls from workers, letting me know how terrified they were to see how fast their co-workers were getting infected with COVID. The companies did nothing to notify workers who had been exposed to COVID, and they did nothing to quarantine those workers. Soon, the outbreaks spread so quickly that companies such Tyson lost much of their workforce. Their response was to [increase line speeds](#) to maintain production levels, cramming workers even more closely together and making conditions more dangerous. Many workers also had to take on jobs and operate equipment that they were not trained for, creating a severe safety hazard. Throughout it all, workers only had 20-minute breaks every

eight hours, which is insufficient time to eat and use bathrooms, let alone actually rest for a moment.

Some of my most painful experiences have involved supporting the families of workers who have died from COVID. I never imagined that due to the negligence of these companies it would fall to us to trace and take inventory of so many lives lost in such a short period of time. It is both tragic and unnecessary that these families are still struggling to pay medical bills, food and rent, and that their lives and stories don't matter to anyone.

After a year and a half of this pandemic, working conditions have worsened drastically because the companies' policies actually accelerate the spread of the virus. In addition to failing to provide substantial protections, their inhumane attendance policies punish workers for missing work while sick, thereby exposing healthy workers to infected co-workers and fostering a vicious cycle of sickness. It's outrageous that workers are currently being fired for accumulating negative "fault points" for being infected with COVID. Companies use these "fault points" to adjust salaries and working days. Not long ago, I helped a worker from a Tyson plant in Springdale, who received a deduction of one point and a half for having to leave the plant because she started to experience COVID symptoms. Human resources simply refused to believe her, and to let her go home. The company did not protect her or other workers from COVID. Workers tell me that the rule inside the plant is: "if you don't have fever, you should be able to work." Eventually, human resources let this worker go home but disciplined her by deducting a half point. Tyson then deducted an additional point when she missed the next day due to COVID. When she did return to work, she learned she was going to be fired because she had reached the 14-point limit allowed by Tyson's fault point system. Tyson puts so-called "essential workers" in danger by asking them – under threat of retaliation or firing – to continue working while infected with COVID. Tyson simply doesn't value worker lives.

Poultry workers should have never been put in the position of choosing between their livelihood and their lives. They should not be expected to jeopardize their health and safety because of greedy companies that have preferred investing their money in protecting their public image instead of the dignity of their employees. We should provide humane working conditions, necessary protective equipment, enforcement of safety standards, paid sick leave, and affordable health care for these essential workers. In addition, the USDA must stop allowing companies to increase line speeds in meat and poultry plants, and withdraw all existing line speed waivers in processing plants. Poultry workers' lives, dignity and humanity are more important than company profits. It is immoral that companies are able to profit from the injury, suffering and death of workers, and it must end now.  
Thank you.