

# Jarrett Brown: Union officials failed to protect packing plant workers

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Earlier this year, outbreaks of COVID-19 ravaged meatpacking plants throughout the country leaving thousands of workers infected and dozens dead. Much has been written about how the companies in the industry failed to take steps to protect their workers and how government regulators stood on the sidelines and did nothing as the virus spread through the plants. What has been overlooked is the role that union officials played in allowing the situation to spiral out of control. Some union leaders chose to maintain cordial relationships with the companies and stable finances instead of protecting the workers' health and safety by directly confronting the companies and demanding that they take preventative measures when the pandemic became a threat.

The meatpacking industry has been in the spotlight during the pandemic because companies in the industry generally failed at protecting their workers. The evidence of that is that there have been large outbreaks at plants across the country. At a pork plant in South Dakota, more than 700 people tested positive for coronavirus. At a poultry plant in North Carolina nearly 600 employees tested positive. At the flagship JBS plant in Greeley, CO, hundreds of employees tested positive and 8 have died.

Here in Green Bay, Wisconsin, JBS and American Foods each had hundreds of employees who tested positive for the virus. Dozens of employees at Salm Partners in Denmark also tested positive.

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The actual number of infections and deaths is unknown because most companies have stopped reporting the numbers. The companies don't want the public to know how many people have been infected.

Union leaders have the obligation to defend the rights of their members and protect their health and safety. Instead, the union leaders, namely those of UFCW International and its local unions, with few exceptions, failed to take action in order to protect their members. They allowed the companies to operate however they wanted and didn't advocate for their members. The union leaders chose to maintain cordial relationships with the companies and stable finances over workers' health and safety. The union leaders waited until their members were sick to start putting out ineffective press releases.

UFCW 1473 represents approximately 12,000 workers at 15 food processing plants in Wisconsin and Upper Michigan, including the workers at JBS - Green Bay. It also represents workers at Smithfield - Patrick Cudahy south of Milwaukee, which is another plant that has been in the news due to a high number of workers being infected at that plant.

John Eiden, the president of UFCW 1473, made no public statements of any kind whatsoever about the outbreak at JBS - Green Bay until hundreds of workers were sick. The day before the company publicly announced the outbreak in the plant, UFCW 1473 made a social media post stating that the international union had made an agreement that would give members a \$4 per hour pay raise and increase worker protection by making protective equipment more readily available and implementing new protocols.

Less than a week later, the plant had to be shut down temporarily. Eiden should have used his clout as union leader to draw the attention of the media and the public to the issue. Doing so would've put pressure on the company to act before members were infected and the plant had to shut down.

The leaders of UFCW 1473 and its representatives were aware of the threat that COVID-19 posed to the workers well before anyone was infected. Eiden and his subordinates made a conscious decision not to take action to protect their members. It is not a surprise that they chose not to intervene because that is their modus operandi. They avoid conflicts with the companies because they know they know that conflicts require time, effort, and money to resolve.

Eiden operates UFCW 1473 like a business. He aims to increase income while decreasing costs associated with representation in order to have more money available for the salaries of the leaders and the representatives. Eiden is paid approximately \$160,000 per year and the representatives are paid between \$80,000 and \$110,000 per year. The union's resources are being used for the benefit of the union leaders rather than for the benefit of the union members.

In order to protect the health and safety of union members, and provide them with all of the benefits of union membership, the union leaders need to change the way that they operate. It is necessary for the union leaders to increase the ratio of union representatives to union members and invest heavily in organizing, engagement, and member empowerment through workers' rights education. The union leaders also need to be willing to use resources to defend their members' rights through the grievance and arbitration processes as well as through complaint resolution processes with government agencies.

If UFCW 1473 had been fully staffed, organized, and engaged, and its members educated about their rights, the union would've had more power and could've forced JBS to act sooner.

Sadly, other UFCW local unions failed to protect their members in the same way that UFCW 1473 did. Hopefully, the UFCW International union and its local union presidents will reflect upon and learn from what went wrong at the packing plants in Green Bay, around Wisconsin, and around the country.

*— Brown was a production worker in the food processing industry for more than 12 years. He was a union steward for UFCW Local 2 and a member of UFCW 1473. Currently, he is a factory worker, activist, and writer in Green Bay, Wisconsin.*