

**Rena Wong, UFCW Local 663 Organizing Director, Testimony
Frontline Worker Pay Working Group
Minnesota Legislature
August 19, 2021**

Good afternoon, Chair and Commissioners, my name is Rena Wong. I am the Organizing Director for United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 663, which represents over 13,200 frontline essential meatpacking, grocery, retail and healthcare workers in Minnesota.

I am here today, on behalf of UFCW Local 663 President Matt Utecht and Local 9 President Rich Morgan, to voice our unions' support to provide frontline worker pay for all frontline essential workers.

Meatpacking is one of the most dangerous industries. Health and Safety is continuously brought up as one of the most important issues. This constant risk, coupled with a global pandemic, led to an extremely dangerous work environment and subsequent COVID outbreaks at meatpacking plants throughout the country. I am sure you have heard in Minnesota about COVID at JBS in Worthington, Pilgrims' Pride in Cold Springs, Hormel in Austin, and many others this last year, where thousands of essential workers are employed.

The JBS plant in Worthington closed for 15 days in April and early May of 2020, then reopened one week after an executive order from the President mandated meatpacking plants stay open.

UFCW worked closely with the State of Minnesota to develop guidelines to protect all union and non-union meatpacking and processing workers from the deadly virus. But guidelines are not mandatory - employers got to choose. OSHA did their best to respond to workers' concerns. However, the agency is set up to be reactive, not pro-active - and workers suffered as a result.

Nationally there have been 132 meatpacking worker deaths and 22,400 meatpacking workers infected or exposed. (DLI can provide a MN specific breakdown of COVID exposure by industry, but information will likely be under reported since there was never a central reporting system or requirement.)

There are 133 meat and poultry processing plants in Minnesota - with roughly 12,000 workers. If you think back to the color coded maps that tracked COVID outbreaks by county last year - you will remember the overlap between the counties reporting COVID cases and the counties where meat and poultry plants are located in greater Minnesota.

UFCW members were required to show up to work so that the people of Minnesota could have access to food and supplies needed during the pandemic. Our members could not work from home. They did not have 6 feet of social distance from customers in stores who leaned over them without masks or 6 feet between themselves while they killed and processed meat.

The least Minnesota can do now is to recognize food workers, and all frontline essential workers, by rewarding them for their hard work and sacrifice throughout this pandemic - make them eligible for the program you are creating for frontline worker pay. Thank you.