

NEWS FROM RWDSU

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Workers Win RWDSU Representation for 1,200 at Pilgrim's Pride Poultry At JBS-Owned facility, a Game-Changer for the Labor Movement

Russellville, Alabama--Today the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), UFCW, announced that 1,200 poultry workers at the Pilgrim's Pride poultry plant in Russellville, Alabama, voted overwhelmingly to join the RWDSU. The vote was 706 to 292 in favor of the union. Pilgrim's Pride is the American division of the Brazilian-owned beef and poultry giant JBS, and is the largest chicken producer in the United States.

The election, held June 7 and 8, marks one of the largest successful union organizing campaigns in Alabama in the last decade in terms of new members, in one of Alabama's largest industries.

"Unions may be under attack across the country but working people still desperately need the security and dignity that comes with a union voice," said RWDSU President Stuart Appelbaum. "The workers at Pilgrim's Pride know they deserve better and have proven there is a better way. This resounding vote will be heard by poultry workers throughout the South as a message of hope," Appelbaum added.

"The key issues at Pilgrim's Pride weren't wages and benefits, they were the right to redress grievances at work, and the ability to have some input into how the place is run. They knew the difference it would make to have a union on their side," said RWDSU Mid-South Council President John Whitaker.

"We had no respect from management, and absolutely no voice in anything that affected us," said Cheryl Kowalski, who works in the sanitation department at the plant.

"They told us what to do and when to do it, and there were no questions allowed. And if there any problems, you couldn't go to management because they did not want to deal with resolving them, and workers here were left bitter and angry. The bottom line was 'do what you are told or you don't have a job.' But the union provided us with a glimmer of hope," Kowalski added.

That "glimmer of hope" spread quickly at the plant, and the company engaged in an all-out effort to destroy the workers' support for joining the union. The company held weeks

of captive audience meetings where they threatened massive layoffs and hinted at the possibility of plant closure if the workers voted for the union, and produced anti-union literature and “vote no” t-shirts. In addition, the company put pressure on local businesses like the service station where union members were meeting to stop allowing union activists inside, and threatened local hotels with boycotts if they didn’t throw union organizers out onto the streets. The company also tried to book meeting rooms at local hotels so the union couldn’t use them in the weeks leading up to the elections.

For employees like Sharon Hill, who works in poultry production, a feeling of optimism began to grow despite these tactics.

“Over several weeks, management held many meetings encouraging us not to vote for the union. But about a month into the organizing drive, I knew we were going to win - I could see it in the employees’ eyes. I spoke with my co-workers a few days before the election and knew they were going to vote yes. We finally had hope in the plant that someone would help us,” Hill said.

For workers at the plant, winning an RWDSU voice isn’t just changing their workplace, it is changing their lives.

“This is a day in my life I will never forget and I am proud of it,” said Pilgrim’s Pride worker – and new RWDSU member – J.R. (Morris) Harris of the poultry production department.

Fast facts on the poultry industry and its importance to Alabama’s economy:

*Poultry is Alabama’s top commodity, comprising 68 percent of the state’s total commodity receipts.

*Poultry represents nearly half of the state’s exports.

*Poultry accounted for \$385 billion of Alabama’s agricultural exports in 2010, 48 percent of the state’s total agricultural exports.

*The poultry industry contributes more than \$10 billion to the state economy and is the leading agricultural revenue segment for the state.

*Alabama ranks third nationally in broiler production and 14th in eggs

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<http://en.calameo.com/read/0004203083ed175c15d9e>

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The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union represents 100,000 members in the U.S. and Canada. The RWDSU is affiliated with the United Food and Commercial Workers Union.