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OP-ED OPINION

By RACHEL MICAH-JONES and MATTHEW SHUDTZ
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President Donald Trump invoked the Defense Production Act to order meat and poultry plants to continue operating despite COVID-19 outbreaks, exposing Maryland's poultry workers to enormous risks. Poultry processors haven't demonstrated they're able to keep workers safe and healthy, but they know that many of these low-wage workers will be forced to return. To top it all off, one of the president's goals with this order was to provide legal immunity to companies, so that they can't be sued by employees who are infected as a result of unsafe working conditions.

All the risks cascade down onto the workers. Many are from immigrant backgrounds and don't speak English. They're also exempted from vital protections, federal relief packages, and can't access COVID-19 treatment and care. We're standing in solidarity with these brave workers, and urging everyone else to do so, too.

COVID-19 has been wreaking havoc on workers forced to continue working in crowded conditions, with few breaks or protective gear, in the region's poultry processing facilities. Their employers' failures to control these hazards have resulted

in a rapid escalation in COVID-19 cases and workers calling in sick in record numbers. With fewer workers on-site, plant operators had to slow down the fast-moving processing lines and the entire supply chain — from egg hatcheries to contract growing operations — went out of whack.

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Those of us who have spent years challenging the economic, racial and environmental injustices of our current food system know this crisis was baked in through decades of industry consolidation, vertical integration and legal loopholes that are built on racist and exploitative conditions.

Farming families and the hardworking folks who meticulously dress the birds and package the good stuff for grocery shelves work hard to feed the world under conditions the company owners would never contemplate enduring themselves. Every day these front line workers are taking on health, safety and economic risks that they shouldn't have to. They are risks that ought to be eliminated by the huge corporations that have the power and the money to do so.

Yet this week, when the labor community was mourning killed and injured workers on Workers Memorial Day, President Donald Trump did the unthinkable. After refusing to deploy the Defense Production Act to ramp up production and distribution of personal protective equipment to front line workers, he happily turned to its extraordinary powers to require poultry plants and meatpacking facilities keep running.

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The truly outrageous part of his announcement is his effort to immunize plant owners from liability to their workers sickened or killed on the job, or to their surviving family members. These workers were already suffering exceptionally high rates of illness and injury caused by production lines that operate too fast, slippery floors, dangerous equipment and regular exposure to disinfecting chemicals. Now

coronavirus exposure has been added to the mix, and workers are seeking the most basic concessions — continued pay and time off to self-isolate, basic levels of personal distancing and protective gear — and slower line speeds.

Plant owners are apparently not willing to accommodate these vital needs, so many workers are taking a more organized approach. Walkouts and demonstrations are popping up around the country, including on the Delmarva Peninsula. Hundreds of complaints are being filed with state and federal safety agencies. And some workers are going straight to court.

Governor Hogan has set a high bar for himself as a protector of Marylanders' health and safety during this pandemic. President Donald Trump is putting him to the test with this week's decision to use the Defense Production Act. We call on the governor to order the Maryland Department of Labor to establish emergency standards to protect workers in the state's poultry processing facilities (and in other essential businesses still operating during the pandemic) and to enforce existing standards to the fullest extent.

We also call on Maryland's state legislators to create a new presumption for workers' compensation claims so that workers in the poultry processing industry (and others like first responders and hospital workers) who contract COVID-19 will be compensated.

And we urge you, our fellow Marylanders, to join hands — virtually, of course — with all of the front line workers risking their lives to keep us safe and maintain critical infrastructure and trade. Search out mutual aid programs in your area and tell your elected officials that you want to see systemic policy change that recognizes the dignity and humanity of workers and shifts the costs of keeping us all safe back to the places where risks can be best managed.

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