

# Des Moines Register

## BUSINESS

# Tyson gave immigrants, refugees footing in US. Where will they go when Perry plant closes?



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In January 2006, Ignacio Calderon reached his 10th anniversary at Tyson Foods in Perry. A photo capturing his career milestone — and his youthful, bearded face — serves as proof.

Calderon was 36 years old and married with four young children. Ten years of steady work and decent pay at the pork plant gave the Michoacán, Mexico, native a chance to put down roots in central Iowa. He bought a home in Perry and a car. And in another five years, he and his wife would welcome their fifth child.

That's why news of the plant's permanent closure hit him hard. Calderon, now 53, says he never imagined the company to which he devoted nearly half his life would be closing for good — replacing his livelihood with uncertainty.

"It was a big surprise for all of us," Calderon said in an interview in Spanish. "We were all stressed out, sad. This was a big deal, and nobody knew that this was going to happen."

Calderon is among the immigrant workers at Tyson who spoke to the Des Moines Register about the challenges he and others will soon face once the plant closes this summer.

For many of them, Tyson has been their first and only employer, and they are nervous about navigating unemployment in the U.S. for the first time. They say they don't know what social benefits they qualify for, how to apply and who they can

turn to for help.

They also say Tyson hired them at a good wage despite their lack of skills and inability to speak English and worry whether other employers could provide similar opportunities and chances to learn.

Jan Flora, emeritus professor of sociology at Iowa State University who has co-authored books on the impact of immigrants on rural communities, said the meatpacking industry has long relied on immigrants and refugees to build up its workforce.

They come in large numbers and are "willing to do the work" at rates that no longer appeal to native-born applicants, Flora said. But mass layoffs like Tyson's leave already marginalized groups even more vulnerable, said Nicole Novak, research assistant professor at the University of Iowa's Department of Community and Behavioral Health.

"Research has found that workers who have a harder time transitioning to other industries -- often this is older workers -- are especially at risk for symptoms of depression and other mental health concerns after an involuntary job loss," Novak said. "Workers who face other barriers to switching industries, such as language barriers, may need extra support to find meaningful and sustainable employment after losing a packing plant job."

**More:** The Tyson plant in Perry, Iowa, is closing after 61 years. What we know about its plans.

## **Tyson plant closure will leave big hole in diverse community of Perry**

Tyson Foods announced its plans last month to permanently close the pork packaging plant in Perry by June 28. Tyson is the city's largest employer, and its departure will leave 1,276 people without jobs and a small town in distress.

The company has transformed Perry into one of the most diverse and fastest-growing communities in Iowa. Nearly 70% of employees at the Tyson location in Perry are Black and Latino, said Roger Kail, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1149, which represents 700 to 800 of the plant's workers. Women make up close to 40%, data provided by Kail shows.

Those figures mirror Tyson's workforce across the U.S., made up of more than 60% minority groups and 39% women, according to a 2023 annual U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission report from the company.

Close to a third of Perry's 8,000 residents identify as Hispanic or Latino, and almost 19% are foreign born, according to the U.S. Census.

**More:** Tyson plant closing announcement takes Perry by surprise, but city leaders vow to rebound

Perry officials recently unveiled PerryNext, a new page on the city's website that lists events, career services and other resources for workers impacted by the closure. It's one of many efforts rolled out by leaders looking to ease the transition and search for a new job.

A Tyson spokesperson said in an email that "we understand the impact of our decision on our team members and the local community" and are working with local and government agencies in Perry. Officials encourage "all affected employees" to consider positions within the company, the spokesperson said. Assistance will be provided for individuals who choose to relocate to another facility.

A collective bargaining agreement between union and Tyson leaders, obtained by the Register, outlines benefits available for workers who physically relocate to Tyson's Waterloo plant. Of 75 available jobs, 15 are for general maintenance positions. The remaining 60 are for "hourly frontline team members," but the agreement doesn't otherwise specify the type of work involved.

Employees who accept a position and move to Waterloo will be eligible to receive \$10,000 from Tyson. The first \$5,000 will be given after a month of employment at the new location, while the other half will be given after one year of employment, the agreement says. Up to \$5,000 also will be offered to alleviate any moving costs. And the company will provide help enrolling children in school and child care.

For workers who relocate to plants other than Waterloo, housing assistance will be offered.

The company says it will retain employees' seniority for health benefits, vacations and holiday pay. These offers are available through June 28, the agreement says.

A spokesperson declined to comment on the details of the bargaining agreement and assistance it would provide employees impacted by the Perry plant's closure.

Calderon said there's no way he could make the commute to Tyson's other locations when the nearest ones to Perry are still far away. The facility in Storm Lake is about an hour and 50-minute drive, while the one in Waterloo is just over two hours.

Uprooting his family is an unrealistic option, he said.

## **'How am I going to survive?' African refugee asks after layoff news**

Employees Kilozo Amisi and Jose Mosengo also were caught off-guard by the news. They said they feel unprepared to handle the uncertainty that lies ahead.

Amisi and Mosengo each came as refugees from Africa less than a decade ago. They became financially stable and independent because of Tyson.

Mosengo, who came to the U.S. from a refugee camp in Zambia, said he moved to Iowa in October 2017 when he couldn't find work in Las Vegas, Nevada. He was told the Des Moines area had more job opportunities and companies such as Tyson Foods were hiring immigrants and refugees.

Mosengo has worked for Tyson Foods for the last six and a half years and is considered the breadwinner in his family. He said he's made good money, which has helped him and his wife pay their bills, including their monthly mortgage and college tuition for their children.

"I'm asking myself: 'How am I going to survive?'" Mosengo told the Rev. Willy Msiando, a local leader in Des Moines' African community, who provided translations from Swahili and Kibembe to the Register.

Msiando, senior pastor at Living Water Evangelical Free Church of Des Moines, and Tricia Gabriel, co-founder of the nonprofit Genesis Youth Foundation, said they empathize with all the workers, many of whom have dedicated years to the Perry packing plant and will soon be let go.

Those jobs helped them find their footing in a new country. The company hired people with varying language skills — an opportunity, Msiando says, that's hard to come by and tough to pass up for immigrants and refugees. Msiando recalled the plant once hiring 11 new arrivals he had referred.

"They're basically starting from scratch to figure out what's next for them," said Gabriel, who also serves as the nonprofit's arts program director.

Mosengo said he's afraid employers will overlook him because of his age and because he has struggled to learn English. He said he also struggles to apply online for jobs.

"I don't know all that technology," he said.

Amisi relayed similar concerns: The 43-year-old said he came to Iowa in 2019 from a refugee camp in Tanzania and immediately began working in Perry at the Tyson facility. It's the only job he's had since coming to America.

## **'Stay calm, have hope,' one local leader says**

In the last few weeks, Gabriel and her husband, Sam Gabriel, have held town hall-style meetings at public libraries for African families impacted by Tyson's closure. The couple, along with other community leaders and partners, listened as workers candidly voiced their concerns. Some participants pitched in, helping usher the conversations and translating responses to English from Swahili and French.

The Gabriels say they understand the fear the families feel. They came to Iowa with their families more than 20 years ago after living in an Ivory Coast refugee camp. They built their nonprofit, which began with sports and arts programs for refugee children and later expanded to include resources for adults and families.

**More:** As Tyson Foods closes Perry plant, are other Iowa facilities headed to the chopping block?

Sam Gabriel, Genesis' executive director, came to the U.S. in 1997, settling in Des Moines with his parents. He said the rest of his siblings arrived a few years later, and many of them secured their first jobs at the Tyson plant in Perry.

Sam Gabriel said his older brother still works there — his 18-year run will come to an end in June.

Tricia Gabriel remembered first seeing the news about the permanent closure on Facebook. She thought of her brother-in-law and quickly shared the social media post with her husband.

But the couple said they began to more fully understand the closure's impact only after a youth participant told them about her parents, who both work at Tyson and are afraid about what will happen when they lose their jobs.

The Gabriels have teamed up with Iowa Workforce Development to host a series of career fairs, which started April 13.

Sam Gabriel said these events are geared toward Tyson employees who live in Des Moines and will take place every second Saturday of the month at Hope+Elim Church, 2500 University Ave., through July. Genesis Youth Foundation is looking for employers with openings to participate in the fair. Inquiries can be sent to [info@genesisyouthfoundation.org](mailto:info@genesisyouthfoundation.org), and more information about Genesis can be found online through the organization's website at [genesisyouthfoundation.org](https://genesisyouthfoundation.org).

Iowa Workforce Development has already deployed career counselors to Perry through its mobile service. Workforce development staff are posted on Tyson grounds, at the management locker room, to support employees from noon to 6 p.m. Wednesdays and noon to 4 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays.

Sam Gabriel said he knows times like these are difficult, but he wants to reassure workers that help is on the way.

"Stay calm, have hope. We, the community as a whole, is working," he said. "There are many committed partners that are working towards making sure no family would become homeless."

*Register reporters Kate Kealey and José Mendiola, who provided translations, contributed to this story.*

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