

# The Jungle in 2010

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In 1906, socialist author Upton Sinclair published *The Jungle*, a powerful exposé of the brutal conditions confronting immigrant workers in Chicago's stockyards, the filth in which meat for the American table was processed, and the corruption and greed of the meatpacking tycoons.

The novel had a dramatic impact, quickly becoming a bestseller. *The Jungle*, wrote Sinclair's contemporary, Jack London, "depicts what our country really is, the home of oppression and injustice, a nightmare of misery, an inferno of suffering, a human hell, a jungle of wild beasts."

The public outcry was such that President Theodore Roosevelt and Congress soon passed the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, a landmark of Progressive Era reform.

The labor and consumer health regulations were never sufficiently rigorous to end the abuse of workers or the marketing of tainted foods, but today, just over 100 years later, those restrictions that were imposed on the food industry's drive for profit have all but vanished. This week's massive recalls of eggs and lunch meats have lifted the veil on the source of the US food supply in brutal and unsanitary sweatshops.

More than a half a billion eggs potentially poisoned with salmonella, likely due to contamination from rodent feces, have now been recalled from states across the US. The eggs were produced by two Iowa companies, Wright County Egg and Hillandale Farms.

There have been 1,300 reported cases of salmonella poisoning—which leads to nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and, in vulnerable populations, death. The actual number of cases may be higher by a factor of 40 due to under-reporting.

Then on Tuesday, 380,000 pounds of deli meats processed by the world's largest meat producer, Tyson Foods, were recalled from Wal-Mart stores nationwide. The cold cuts were likely contaminated with listeria, a strain of bacteria that can lead to nausea, head and neck aches, and listeriosis, a potentially deadly condition.

The week's outbreaks are not mere accidents. They result from the steady deregulation of US industry over the past three decades. Claiming that government red tape interferes with the "invisible hand" of the capitalist "free market,"

every Democratic and Republican administration since Jimmy Carter has furthered the rollback of standards and enforcement of basic safety, environmental and financial regulation.

The result is a social catastrophe. From the financial crisis that erupted in 2008 as a result of the unchecked swindling of the major banks, to the trampling over safety and environmental rules that led to BP Gulf oil disaster, to the poisoning of the very food supply, the US population is at the mercy of the most rapacious corporate interests. This year also witnessed the most deadly mine disaster in four decades at an AT Massey mine in West Virginia that had been repeatedly cited for safety and health violations.

In all of these cases, corporate criminality plays a major role, as social malefactors brutally exploit workers and knowingly flood the marketplace with defective and dangerous goods. They do so with impunity, since they enjoy the collaboration of the very government agencies that are nominally there to regulate them.

A case in point is Wright County Egg's owner, Austin "Jack" DeCoster, who has compiled a lengthy record of labor, health and environmental violations. In 1996, DeCoster had to pay \$2 million for what then-Labor Secretary Robert Reich called "some of the most heinous workplace violations I'd seen." The violations at the Iowa "agricultural sweatshop," Reich said, included workers forced "to live in trailers infested with rats and handle manure and dead chickens with their bare hands."

In 2001, DeCoster settled for \$1.5 million a complaint brought by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission that his company had subjected 11 undocumented Mexican women workers to a "sexually hostile work environment," including rape and sexual assault by their supervisors. DeCoster is notorious for paying poverty wages and ruthlessly exploiting undocumented immigrants.

Videos posted on YouTube of DeCoster-owned egg farms and similar assembly line operations owned by others show hens packed into cages together with the rotting corpses of dead birds.

Such conditions are not the exception but the rule. "There are no requirements to inspect almost any kind of livestock

farm. There's no requirements for inspecting turkeys, or chickens, or pigs or cows," Darrell Trampel, a poultry veterinarian and research specialist at Iowa State University, told *Food Safety News*. "It's just not a regulatory requirement in this country."

Even where inspections are ostensibly required, genuine oversight and enforcement are virtually nonexistent. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA), having seen its budget halved in the last decade, now has a capacity of one inspector for every 350 food production facilities.

A recent report by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHS) Office of Inspector General (OIG) found that more than half of all US food facilities have gone five years without a single inspection from the FDA, the federal agency created in the aftermath of the publication of *The Jungle*. Even in cases where the FDA found violations, it rarely took action, including for firms with a history of violations.

The FDA does not even have the authority to order recalls when it discovers food contamination. In keeping with the ethos of "self-regulation," it can only request that the offending company voluntarily issue a recall.

The result is a situation in which each year about 81 million Americans are made sick, 300,000 are hospitalized, and 9,000 die from eating contaminated foods, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The poisoning of tens of millions of consumers is directly linked to brutal labor conditions in the food production factories. Jurgis Rudkus, the Lithuanian immigrant protagonist of *The Jungle*, has been replaced at today's food plants by hundreds of thousands of Mexican and Central American immigrant workers.

An unknown number are injured and maimed on the job each year, often as the result of repetitive cutting motions with sharp knives. These injuries are routinely hidden by company doctors. As the Government Accountability Office noted in 2005, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has "no specific standard that allows OSHA to cite employers for hazards" or even a means "to assess the appropriate speed at which the [butcher] lines should operate."

But as opposed to Sinclair's time, the horrors of today's food processing industry scarcely create a ripple in the media or within any section of the political establishment. The latest mass poisonings have not resulted in any suggestion that new reforms for controlling the food industry be put in place.

New regulations on egg production recently put in place by the Obama administration will do nothing to ameliorate the situation. Significantly, the new rules leave out a

requirement that chickens be inoculated against salmonella, a measure that is credited in Great Britain with reducing human salmonella cases by 95 percent.

Never has the power of the corporate and financial elite in America been wielded with such arrogant and unchecked force as today. The disappearance of a reform-minded liberal intelligentsia such as that which existed in early decades of the last century has gone hand in hand with a colossal growth of social inequality and the concentration of wealth at the very pinnacle of the economic ladder—and a protracted and accelerating decline in the social position of the working class.

In this process, the trade union bureaucracy has played a critical role. The unions' betrayals of scores of food workers' struggles, and their capitulation to union-busting, wage-cutting and speed-up, have led to a resurgence of the sweatshop conditions that Sinclair exposed a century ago.

These social horrors are rooted in the capitalist system itself. Modern mass society, which links billions of people all over the world in a complex web of production, distribution and consumption, is absolutely incompatible with a system in which the main levers of economic life are privately owned and subordinated to the accumulation of immense wealth by a financial and corporate aristocracy.

The socially destructive practices of private corporations will not be halted unless and until workers take matters into their own hands. The working class must directly challenge the property, prerogatives and power of the financial elite, and end its stranglehold over society. It must organize itself as an independent political force, united behind a socialist program that includes the nationalization of the food and agribusiness giants under the democratic control of the working population.

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