

Oxfam report exposes inhuman conditions of poultry workers

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Oxfam America released a report on October 27 titled “Lives on the Line: The Human Cost of Cheap Chicken,” which documents the terrible conditions facing the approximately quarter million workers in the poultry industry. The report describes poor pay, poor treatment, and dangerous working conditions.

“Lives on the Line” paints a disturbing picture of the typical chicken-processing plant, stating:

“The environment inside the plant is not only harsh, but unhealthy. The processing rooms are cold, humid, and slippery with grease, offal, blood, and water. The air is full of chemicals from cleaning, processing, and cooking. The line is fast, the machines are loud, and the tools are sharp. These conditions pose constant dangers to workers’ health and well-being.”

The report provides statistics gleaned from government, medical, academic, and other sources that indicate that poultry workers:

- Suffer occupational illness at rates five times higher than the average for workers.
- Suffer carpal tunnel syndrome at rates seven times higher than average.
- Suffer repetitive strain from microtasks at rates 10 times higher than average.
- Make the same cutting, pulling, and hanging motions on the line anywhere from 20,000 to 100,000 times per shift.
- Experience injuries serious enough to require medical attention at a rate of 17 percent for workers who debone, cut, and trim chickens.
- “Commonly report stinging or burning eyes, nose, and throat; shortness of breath or asthma-like symptoms;

headaches; and nausea.”

- Are at increased risk of adverse respiratory disease due to dust.
- Are sometimes unable to recover from staph infections because of antibiotics they are exposed to on the job.
- “Have one of the highest human exposures to transmissible agents that cause cancer and other diseases in chickens and turkeys, and also have other occupational carcinogenic exposures.”
- In one study, experienced 80 percent more depressive symptoms than a peer population in the same geographic area.
- Lack proper bathroom breaks, which can lead to kidney damage, infection, and potentially death, and which causes some workers to wear diapers.
- Work in high humidity, which can exacerbate problems from repetitive motions and lead to respiratory and allergic reactions.

A primary factor in the excessive rates of injury for poultry workers is the enormous speedup of the line. The maximum number of chickens that each worker must process per minute has increased from 70 in 1979 to 140 today. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), with the support of the industry’s largest trade association, the National Chicken Council, has proposed raising the limit to 175 birds per minute.

Injuries may also be underreported because workers are afraid of being disciplined, fired, or deported for disclosing injuries. Workers conveyed stories about being penalized for sustaining injuries, and being forced to sign forms relieving the company of responsibility.

When injuries are reported, the worker is typically sent to company medical personnel who may not be qualified to treat him or her. The companies have an incentive to keep the level of treatment at “first aid” as defined by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA),

because companies have no obligation to record or report incidents only treated with first aid. OSHA's expansive definition of "first aid" includes "even drilling a fingernail or toenail to relieve pressure."

"Lives on the Line" describes OSHA's lack of staff, funding, standards, and enforcement methods. Oxfam notes that OSHA "has enough personnel to inspect just 1 percent of all workplaces in the US each year; at current staffing levels, it would take 114 years to inspect each workplace once." The agency has no regulations with respect to line speed.

When OSHA does find violations, companies can easily treat the penalties as the cost of doing business. The report quotes a former policy director at OSHA who stated, "Even when an inspector discovers life-threatening violations, the penalties are shockingly small."

The largest chicken producer in the United States, Tyson, has incurred more than \$500,000 in fines for safety violations in the last six years, but has received \$4.2 billion in federal contracts since 2000. The federal contracts are only a small fraction of Tyson's revenue, which was \$37.8 billion in 2014, with profits of \$856 million. The company's chairman, John Tyson, who "earned" \$8.8 million in 2014, could easily handle the company's fines himself.

The situation is similar for the second-largest chicken producer in the US, Pilgrim's. The company had over \$700 million in profits in 2014, and paid its president and CEO, William Lovette, \$9.3 million that year. Pilgrim's has incurred just over \$300,000 in fines since 2011.

In contrast, the average pay for poultry workers is about \$11 per hour, with annual incomes for most workers falling between \$20,000 and \$25,000 per year. Most employers do not offer meaningful pay raises over time. Many companies flagrantly violate the law by failing to pay their employees for the time they spend putting on and taking off their work gear, and for overtime pay. Workers often have to pay for the protective equipment they wear.

The workers' miserable compensation is matched by their miserable benefits. Most workers pay a weekly fee for health insurance that does not cover family members, and does not pay for care provided by medical personnel not recommended by the company. Virtually no one in the industry receives paid time off.

Pay is even worse and benefits are non-existent for the increasing number of poultry workers who work through a labor contractor instead of directly for a poultry company. "Lives on the Line" notes that among the

benefits to poultry companies using labor contractors, "the company avoids the risk related to the hiring of undocumented workers."

The report states that "the industry takes advantage of workers who live and work in a climate of fear," which makes immigrants, particularly undocumented ones, ideal for poultry companies. The industry is so effective at taking advantage of the desperation faced by workers around the world that "Lives on the Line" includes mention of a Tyson plant in Missouri "where at least a dozen different languages are spoken."

In addition to immigrants, many poultry plants employ prisoners. The report does not include many details about this practice, but one can imagine the cost savings for the companies.

Incredibly, after unveiling the poultry industry's abuse and exploitation of its workers, Oxfam concludes that the solution is to be sought in the self-reform of the industry's four largest employers. Oxfam also makes recommendations for Congress and OSHA to take measures that will protect poultry workers, ignoring the fact that the US government has engaged in a decades-long bipartisan attack on the living standards of the working class, with immigrant workers suffering the worst.

The Oxfam report promotes illusions in the trade unions, specifically mentioning the "vital representation" of the United Food & Commercial Workers (UFCW). The UFCW has historically played a role as least as criminal in the food industry as that of the United Auto Workers in the auto industry.

In addition, the Oxfam report suggests in places that the American consumer is to blame for the plight of poultry workers. The report refers to "America's chicken habit" and claims that "Americans today prefer their chicken in pieces," while drawing a connection with the number of repetitive motions workers must make.

According to such logic, the exploitation of Asian garment workers can be blamed on the insatiable desire for cheap clothing by people just like the poultry workers profiled in Oxfam's report.

Nevertheless, "Lives on the Line" is a valuable report that serves as an indictment of the profit system.



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