

Bone-crushing labor prevails across the American meatpacking industry

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One hundred and thirteen years have passed since Upton Sinclair wrote about the practice of abuse and exploitation of workers in Chicago's meat packing industry in *The Jungle*. Much of what was written then about abuse and exploitation still rings true in present day America.

While the meatpacking industry has historically been a dirty and dangerous occupation, taking workers lives and limbs, a dangerous job will become a lot worse with the Trump administration pushing a further deregulation.

In a drive to ensure profits are maximized regardless of the result to the broad majority of workers, the United States Department of Agriculture has declared that the meat packing giants are essentially capable of regulating themselves. The changes will translate to an already poorly regulated industry being allowed to input more dangerous and drastic increases in line speeds and a reduction of safety inspections.

A new rule which went into effect in September reduces the number of inspectors required at pork plants and also removes a cap on the line speeds. According to a report produced by the National Employment Law Project, "the new rule would remove 40 percent of government food safety inspectors from the pig slaughter plants, turning the task over to plant operators with no required training, and allow plants to aggressively increase their already breakneck line speeds to process more hogs per hour and increase profits."

The Trump administration, by removing limits on line speeds, is throwing workers into a literal meat grinder, guaranteeing that more workers will sacrifice their health and safety to benefit the profit interests of corporate management. "We've already gone from the line of exhaustion to the line of pain..." a poultry worker

told a Human Rights Watch investigator, "When we're dead and buried, our bones will keep hurting."

While shoppers are often reassured of the purportedly humane treatment of animals processed for consumption, they are not made aware that the workers who produce the meat are treated daily with the utmost disrespect, forced to work in unsafe, inhumane conditions which lead to serious injuries and death.

The women and men who do the killing, deboning, cutting and packing in the American meat industry are white, black, Hispanic, young and old, native born and immigrant. They are all paid poverty wages—workers in the meat packing industry earn on average \$23,800 per year or just \$11.44 per hour—operating under the high pressure of line speed, wielding sharp knives with numbing repetition.

A slaughterer or meat packer can get salaries ranging between \$16,000 and \$24,000 depending on experience. Slaughterers and meat packers will most likely earn a pay level of \$24,100 yearly.

When compared to the revenues of the largest meat and poultry companies, it becomes evident workers are being massively exploited. Tyson Foods reported revenue around \$40 billion for 2018, Cargill raked in as much as \$114 billion and Smithfield reported receiving more than \$14 billion.

Meat packers have some of the highest rates of occupational injury and illness in the United States. Workers recently interviewed by HRW for the organization's latest review of the American meatpacking industry reported shared experiences of serious injury or illness caused by their work.

The United Nations Human Rights Report found that "together poultry slaughter and processing companies reported more severe injuries to the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) than,

construction workers, sawmill workers, and oil and gas workers.” OSHA data shows that a worker in the meat and poultry industry lost a body part or was sent to the hospital for in-patient treatment about every other day between 2015 and 2018.

Workers in the meat and poultry industry work in environments where workspaces are refrigerator-cold or excessively hot, cramped, coated with grease and blood; saturated with the smell of dead animals and overpowering chemicals. “Everyone who goes to the plant is risking their lives every day,” Monica R., a worker at a Smithfield-owned hog plant told HRW, “you come home and give thanks to God because we don’t know when we’re going to get hurt.”

Like many other hazardous and exhausting low-wage industries in the United States, meat and poultry slaughtering and processing plants exploit the labor of immigrant workers, who are forced to work under the most precarious conditions for the lowest wages. HRW spoke with many immigrant workers from the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico and the Philippines for their report.

HRW described in their report working life for the modern-day immigrant slaughterhouse worker: “Rosa P., an undocumented worker at a poultry plant, reported receiving a phone call from her employer, telling her that the identification documents she had provided to prove her work authorization had been flagged as fraudulent by the government. She stopped going to work but returned a month later and applied to work at the same plant with new papers and a new name. She now works at the same position where she has worked for nearly a decade, with the same supervisor, and same co-workers—but with a new name, ‘no one cares’ Rosa said.”

The report also noted comments from a hog-processing worker who stated, “We don’t work with our real names, so we are afraid.” Immigrant workers live in constant fear of retaliation and possible deportation which causes many workers who are undocumented or have family members who are undocumented to be hesitant to speak up for better conditions in the workplace.

Regardless of their documentation or place of birth, slaughterhouse workers are often afraid to speak out against dangerous working conditions due to real possibility of management retaliation and victimization.

“Us workers are afraid,” Rebecca G., an immigrant worker at a poultry plant in Arkansas told HRW, “people don’t speak up or say what’s wrong about the chemicals, or the speed of the line, or the discrimination.” Another worker commented “what’s the point of complaining, they’re not going to hear us, they’re just going to treat us bad because you put in a complaint, and so the workers put up with it, and put up with it, and put up with it.”

While the Trump administration is today leading the charge in the attack against meat and poultry workers, the degradation of conditions for the segment of workers have been carried out by Democratic and Republican administration for decades with the collusion of the AFL-CIO and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW).

The unions set the mold for corporate collaboration over the last three decades when they worked to defeat the ten-month strike of Hormel meatpacking workers in Austin, Minnesota in 1986. In the pursuit of profit, meat and poultry slaughtering and processing companies have been free to maximize the volume of production and minimize the cost of labor by pushing production speeds faster.

The latest rule change is the next stage in a race to the bottom and a return to working conditions which prevailed at the beginning of the 20th century. Safety standards are to be reduced even further in order to guarantee ever greater fortunes for rich CEOs and billionaire investors.

Workers in the meat and poultry industry must form rank and file committees independent of the unions in order to fight back for better wages and working conditions. The fight for better conditions is dependent on the fight against the capitalist system and the two parties, Democrats and Republican, which defend it. Above all this means taking up the fight for workers control over production and all of societies resources, scientifically organized to meet the needs of all.



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