

Meatpacking's Human Toll

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Working conditions in U.S. meat and poultry plants should trouble the conscience of every American who eats beef, pork or chicken.

Dispatching the nonstop tide of animals and birds arriving on plant "kill floors" and "live hang" areas has always been hazardous and exhausting labor. Turning an 800-pound animal (or even a five-pound fowl) into products for supermarkets or fast-food restaurants is, by its nature, demanding physical labor in bloody, greasy surroundings.

But meatpacking and poultry workers face more than hard work in tough settings. They perform the most dangerous factory jobs in the country. U.S. meat and poultry employers put workers at predictable risk of serious physical injury even though the means to avoid such injury are known and feasible. In doing so, they violate the right of workers to a safe place of employment.

"Faster, faster, get that product out the door!" is the industry byword. The results are cuts, amputations, skin disease, permanent arm and shoulder damage, and even death from the force of repeated hard cutting motions. When injured employees seek workers' compensation claims for their injuries, they are told, "You got hurt at home, not on the job."

The workers who face these hazards are, increasingly, immigrants, most from Mexico and Central America but also from many other parts of the world. Companies exploit their vulnerabilities: limited English skills; uncertainty about their rights; alarm about their immigration status if they are undocumented workers.

The U.S. government does little to protect meatpacking workers. As the Government Accountability Office has pointed out, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration has "no specific standard that allows OSHA to cite employers for hazards" relating to line speed and repetitive stress injuries. Indeed, job safety enforcement officials do not even have data "to assess the appropriate speed at which the lines should operate." This information does not exist because companies refuse to let government regulators or independent researchers measure line speed, examine workers' knife-cutting motions or study musculoskeletal injuries from repeated hard cutting.

The American Meat Institute says that injury rates have declined in recent years. That does not answer the question of whether injury rates are still far too high. The GAO has noted doubts about "the validity of the data" on which the reported decline in injuries is based. OSHA does not even have a systematic program for auditing injury reports in meat and poultry plants.

One problem with published injury reports is that they don't include night-shift workers who perform the most dangerous jobs in the industry, using caustic chemicals and high-powered hoses to remove blood, bone and gristle from moving machinery parts. Their injuries are counted with those of hotel room cleaners and building janitors.

Moreover, company underreporting of injuries is rampant -- to an unknown extent, the claimed decline in the injury rate reflects bad numbers, not a real falloff in injuries. Workers are under constant pressure from managers and supervisors not to report injuries (many managers get pay bonuses for low reporting rates), and fear losing their jobs if they report injuries. Immigrant workers especially are vulnerable to pressure not to file such reports.

When workers seek to organize to protect themselves, meatpacking companies use tactics of fear, intimidation and interference to block union organizing efforts. For example, Smithfield Foods fired union supporters and threatened to close its massive hog slaughtering plant in Tar Heel, N.C., when workers there tried to form a union. Company police have targeted union supporters for harassment, arrests and beatings. Some of these violations of workers' organizing rights go back eight years, but National Labor Relations Board remedies have not been enforced.

The meatpacking industry has shown little inclination to respect its workers' rights on its own. Congress and the Bush administration should take decisive steps to protect the lives and well-being of these men and women. But they are unlikely to act until consumers demand meat that is not tainted by workers' blood, sweat and fear.

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