

**Always Working Beyond the Capacity of Our Bodies:
Meat and Poultry Processing Work Conditions and
Human Rights in the Midwest**

A Report by the Midwest Coalition for Human Rights

The University of Minnesota, Human Rights Program in the Institute of Global Studies

October 2012

WHO WE ARE

The Midwest Coalition for Human Rights is a network of 56 organizations, service providers, and university centers that work together to promote and protect human rights in our Midwest region. Through collaboration in the Heartland, we advocate, educate and take action with a strong regional voice on national and international human rights issues.

The Coalition was founded in 1995 as a result of the serious human rights violations occurring in the United States and around the world. Cognizant of the mood of national isolationism in the United States and in our Midwest region, and taking into account the skills and interest of international human rights individual advocates and groups working in the North American Heartland, the Coalition strives to increase communication and collaborative work in the region.

Founded in 2001, the Human Rights Program in the Institute for Global Studies at the University of Minnesota educates students by connecting them with academic and real-world experience in the field of human rights. We bring together faculty and students with other human rights actors, including governmental and nongovernmental organizations, to support interdisciplinary research and training in the field. We encourage students to increase our knowledge about preventing human rights violations by using their abundant skills and curiosity to undertake research, analysis and strategic advocacy on human rights issues.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Midwest Coalition for Human Rights extends our deepest appreciation to all who have assisted. Primarily, we thank the individual workers who participated in our focus groups and took the time to give us a glimpse into the issues they face in their workplaces.

Thank you to the following individuals who contributed to the research, authorship and editing of this report: Silvia Alvarez, University of Minnesota; Christopher Strunk, Augustana College, previously at the University of Minnesota; Barbara Frey, University of Minnesota Human Rights Program; Rochelle Hammer and Claire Leslie, Midwest Coalition for Human Rights; and Darcy Tromanhauser and Omaid Zabih, Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest.

We are grateful to the Public Welfare Foundation and to Nebraska Appleseed for their support of this work.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	3
The Meatpacking Industry	4
Meatpacking and Poultry Processing in the Midwest.....	6
Federal and State Safety Oversight.....	7
Methodology.....	8
Research Findings.....	9
Line Speed	10
Exposure to Chemicals	13
Discrimination and Exploitation.....	15
Conclusions.....	16
Recommendations.....	17
References.....	22

INTRODUCTION

Meatpacking continues to be one of the most dangerous jobs in America. Working with sharp knives and other tools along a rapidly moving production line, workers often suffer from serious cuts and crippling repetitive motion injuries such as severe carpal tunnel and tendonitis that can permanently impair the use of their hands, arms, and shoulders. This report describes the experiences of meat and poultry workers in two Midwestern states. In 2010-11, the Midwest Coalition for Human Rights conducted six focus group interviews with Latino workers in rural Minnesota and Iowa communities. Our research documented several significant concerns about working conditions and human rights in meatpacking and poultry plants. Most notably, workers linked serious injuries to the rapid speed of the production line. Workers also described being exposed on a regular basis to dangerous chemicals on the factory floor. Finally, workers reported facing discrimination and abuse from supervisors. These findings, which confirm previous studies of the industry, are part of a larger project on the working conditions and human rights of meatpacking and poultry processing workers by the Midwest Coalition for Human Rights.

The first section of the report provides an overview of the meat and poultry industry in the Midwest, working conditions in meatpacking and poultry processing plants, and current legislation on the industry in several Midwest states. The second section describes the methodology for the study, which includes six focus groups conducted with workers in Minnesota and Iowa. The third section presents the themes from the focus group discussions and discusses three issues in depth. The final section summarizes the findings of the study and offers policy recommendations.

THE MEATPACKING AND POULTRY PROCESSING INDUSTRY

More than 100 years after the publication of Upton Sinclair's classic novel *The Jungle*, meatpacking remains a dangerous industry. Once located primarily in Midwestern cities like Chicago, St. Paul and Kansas City, over the past 30 years meatpacking companies have relocated to rural communities in the Midwest and South. This shift in the site of production is part of a much broader reorganization of the industry. Between the 1930s and 1970s, high rates of unionization in the industry helped to improve working conditions and wages. By the 1970s, meatpacking workers made comparable salaries to middle-class workers in the auto and steel industries (Human Rights Watch 2004). Beginning in the 1980s, however, changes in the industry have resulted in a sharp decline in union membership alongside deteriorating wages and working conditions.

Meat and poultry companies were able to lower labor and overall production costs by developing new production systems like the disassembly line, which allows workers to slaughter and process animals through simple and repetitive tasks at higher speeds. The line resulted in higher production and eliminated the need for highly skilled butchers, permitting companies to hire more low-wage workers (Gabriel 2008). Machines are an important part of processing plants, but automation has not fully replaced manual labor because of the different shapes and sizes of meat pieces (Stull et al. 1992). Still, new technologies have exposed workers to a variety of hazards and a stubbornly high rate of injury in meatpacking plants.

Meatpacking plants are full of potentially dangerous machines, levers, stairs, and chemicals. These inherent risks are worsened by increasing line speeds and other features of plants. Over the last century, a large body of research has documented the unhealthy aspects of meatpacking work (Commons 1904; Gouveia and Stull 1977; Horowitz 1997; Grey 1997; Dalla

and Christensen 2005). Workers labor in confined spaces, work long hours without sufficient breaks, generally receive inadequate training to use the equipment, and perform dangerous tasks. Workers also deal with loud noises, use sharp tools, and must lift and carry heavy carcasses on slippery floors. They are frequently exposed to extreme temperatures because of the need for continuous refrigeration in meatpacking and poultry processing plants, and often come into contact with dangerous chemicals (Human Rights Watch 2004).

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the 12.1 incidence rate (injured workers per 100 full-time workers) in the meatpacking industry in 2007 was more than twice the national average for manufacturing jobs. Although the injury rate has declined in recent decades, government agencies have suggested that official statistics almost certainly undercount the number of injuries that occur in plants (Government Accountability Office 2005). Meatpacking workers can make up to 20,000 cuts each day, often resulting in serious injuries, lost work days and worker compensation claims (Nebraska Appleseed 2009). Workers experience significant bodily pain and commonly report lower back problems and various cumulative trauma, tendon, joint, and nerve disorders from performing repetitive motions.¹ The most common injuries in packing and processing plants are cuts, strains and carpal tunnel syndrome, in which repeated, rapid and forceful motions pinch and compress the nerve that runs from the wrist to the hand, resulting in crippling injuries. Injuries like amputations and fractures also occur (GAO 2005).

In spite of these well-documented hazards, the underreporting of injury and illness remains a chronic problem. Deteriorating conditions in meat and poultry plants have coincided with, but were not caused by, the reemergence of a predominantly immigrant workforce. Unlike the early 20th century, immigrants in the contemporary meatpacking industry are largely from

¹ In the early 1990s, the rate of cumulative trauma disorders in meatpacking was higher than all other manufacturing industries (Gorsche et al. 1999).

Latin America, although others are from Africa and Southeast Asia. Workers, many of whom are English-language learners, fear retaliation and are reluctant to complain or report injuries. Many fear losing their job, and undocumented workers have additional pressures not to speak out. Research in meatpacking plants indicates that power disparities on the line deeply divide workers and supervisors (Striffler 2005). Supervisors have been known to use abusive language towards workers (Nebraska Appleseed 2009), creating an environment where workers can more easily be denied their legal, political and civil rights and leaving them particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

MEATPACKING AND POULTRY PROCESSING IN THE MIDWEST

Meat processing has a long history in small towns across the Midwest. Since the 1960s, however, changes in the industry have fundamentally transformed the economic and social structure of meat processing in the region. Companies shut down plants in cities and opened up new ones in the rural Midwest closer to the sources of meat and farther from union centers. Immigrants and refugees from Mexico, Central America, Africa and Southeast Asia have recently found work in Midwestern meatpacking plants. Immigrants currently make up between 20 and 50 percent of meatpacking workers in the United States (Passel 2006; GAO 2005). Although some workers have been recruited directly from Mexico and Central America, most Latino immigrants today use social networks to find work in meatpacking plants (Striffler 2005). Participants in this study generally had limited employment options because of their lack of experience and language skills, but they were still able to obtain jobs through friends or relatives from their country of origin who were already working in meatpacking and poultry processing plants. Meat and poultry processing offers immigrants relatively high wages, stable work and

low costs of living in rural Midwestern towns (Dalla et al. 2005). Immigrants are able to secure jobs that require few English skills and little to no previous training in the industry.

Despite some benefits, workers across the Midwest have described meatpacking and poultry processing plants as dangerous, difficult and physically demanding. Studies in Nebraska and Minnesota have shown that line speed is workers' primary concern (Nebraska Appleseed 2009; Frey et al. 2009). Workplace safety, medical attention, housing, and corporate control of labor are other important issues (Grey 1997; Griffith 1995, Grey and Barham 2002). Immigrant and Latino workers in the Midwest often experience discrimination and abuse from supervisors (Nebraska Appleseed 2009; Dalla et al. 2005). Additionally, many immigrants in the rural Midwest tend to be isolated from mainstream society. Although research has suggested that many workers enjoy living in rural communities, language and cultural differences as well as occasional discrimination by local residents create obstacles to real integration into local communities where they work and live (Dalla et al. 2005).

FEDERAL AND STATE SAFETY OVERSIGHT

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is the primary enforcer of meat and poultry processing workers' safety in the United States. Since the 1970s, OSHA has developed general standards and guidelines for workplace safety and provided oversight through worksite visits, although it currently inspects less than one percent of all U.S. workplaces (Nebraska Appleseed 2009). While OSHA has improved meatpacking worker safety in some ways (GAO 2005), the agency is constantly underfunded and understaffed. United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulations also cover some aspects of the meat and poultry industry, including broad guidelines for acceptable production line speeds. However, these are

based entirely on food safety considerations and therefore overlook concerns about worker safety. Thus, as long as the USDA certifies that the product is uncontaminated, the speed of the line in a given plant is acceptable (Human Rights Watch 2004).

During the last decade, two Midwestern states have created a parallel set of regulations for the meatpacking industry. In Nebraska, state officials responded to concerns about unsafe working conditions in meatpacking plants by creating the Nebraska Meatpacking Industry Workers Bill of Rights in 2000 (Gabriel 2008). The Bill lists 11 fundamental rights for meatpacking workers, including the right to a safe workplace, to adequate equipment and training, and the right to be free of discrimination. It also created a part-time meatpacking workers rights coordinator in the state and required meatpacking companies to post a list of workers' rights in the processing plant (Nebraska Appleseed 2009). While this was a productive first step, it has not been enough to address the core concerns of meatpacking workers' health and safety.

In 2007, the Minnesota State legislature passed a similar Packinghouse Bill of Rights. The legislation mandates that employers provide workers with adequate equipment and information about safety and requirements of jobs in meatpacking plants. It also requires that employers inform meatpacking workers about their rights. Other Midwestern states, including Iowa, an important center for the beef and pork industry, have not implemented specific meatpacking regulations.

METHODOLOGY

Between Fall 2010 and Fall 2011, a researcher with the Midwest Coalition for Human Rights worked with community-based organizations to facilitate six focus group interviews with

Latino meatpacking workers – three in rural Minnesota and three in rural Iowa. The inclusion criteria for participants were: immigrant and/or Latino individuals who work in the meat and poultry industry. In total, 36 meatpacking and poultry processing workers from several different Latin American countries participated in the study. 14 participants were female, and 22 were male. All focus group discussions were conducted in Spanish, and participants were asked open-ended questions about their experiences about working conditions and human rights in meatpacking plants. Focus group participants had a range of experience working in the beef, pork and poultry industries, as well as small, medium and large plants.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Focus groups participants identified a number of concerns about the working conditions at meatpacking and poultry processing plants in Minnesota and Iowa. Most workers said that the speed of the production line is their primary concern. The fast pace of the line forces workers to rush to complete their tasks and often prevents them from attending to basic tool maintenance procedures. Working in confined spaces along the rapidly moving line also leads to cuts and other injuries. Broadly speaking, health is a central concern for workers but many pointed to a lack of adequate first aid care at the plant. While medical staff are present at plants, workers complained that they were often sent back to work without receiving medical care and were actively discouraged from seeing a doctor.

Focus group participants also described a generally difficult and unsafe work environment. Workers reported discomfort from the loud noise levels that are commonplace at processing plants. They are required to wear ear plugs, but as a result, communication with fellow workers is difficult and they often have to yell in order to be heard. Workers are also

exposed to extreme temperatures, and potentially dangerous chemicals and fluids from dead animals. Although focus group participants were generally aware of the health risks, they admitted that they are not always well prepared for accidents involving chemicals.

Finally, focus group participants said that they experienced discrimination and exploitation at the hands of their supervisors. Supervisors play an important role in the fast paced environment of meatpacking and processing plants and have a disproportionate amount of power in relation to workers. Participants described how supervisors closely monitor break times and sometimes increase the line speed following bathroom breaks. Focus group participants consistently complained about not having enough time to eat lunch or go to the bathroom during the work day. Workers also reported feeling intimidated and, in some cases, poorly treated by their supervisors. This abuse was often based on race, ethnicity, and immigration status. Undocumented immigrants were insulted and singled out for the worst jobs because they were unlikely to complain.

LINE SPEED

The speed of the production line was the most notable complaint of workers participating in this study. Research has shown that despite important differences in production systems, line speeds across beef, pork and poultry industries have steadily increased over the past 30 years (Stull and Broadway 1995; 2004). In the Midwest, workers have reported that the speed of the line has continued to increase in recent years (Nebraska Appleseed 2009; Frey et al. 2009). In order to maximize processing volume, companies have an incentive to run the line as fast as possible. Studies have shown, however, that this can compromise the health and safety of workers. High line speeds and repetitive motions result in a variety of injuries, including

debilitating back pain and carpal tunnel syndrome (Dalla and Christensen 2005; Human Rights Watch 2004; Nebraska Appleseed 2009).

The tasks that workers perform on the production line are physically demanding, repetitive, and often require working at extreme speeds. Workers described standing for long periods of time on production lines that move unrelentingly fast. As a result, they often suffer cuts and repetitive motion injuries. Workers who use knives while working on the production line face multiple risks:

“The pieces come one after the other, if the line turns faster, workers cutting with knives get harmed.” (Beef worker in Minnesota)

Performing repetitive and physically demanding tasks at a high rate of speed results in a great deal of harm to the arms, hands and wrists of workers, and can cause severe nerve damage:

“...workers develop these types of masses [protuberances] in their wrists and lose strength.”
(Worker in Minnesota)

Workers are often grouped closely together along the production line. While each worker performs a relatively simple and specific task, any mistake can result in injury for a co-worker standing next to them. The risk of an accident becomes amplified when workers rush to complete their tasks because of the rapidly moving production line:

“The hooks run very fast, I cannot leave an empty hook. It is really difficult to catch a cow and hang it in a rush. It is risky because if I do not hang it tight it can fall.”
(Beef worker in Minnesota)

Many workers described being unable to sharpen their knives due to the fast pace of the line. Tools commonly become dull over the course of a work day, but workers cannot stop to sharpen them because the line always continues to move. As a result, workers are forced to put more effort into cutting each piece of meat:

“We have to sharpen our tools at the same time as we are working, then the pieces accumulate, we have less space and we have to rush even more.”

(Worker in Iowa)

Workers are also forced to rush after a breakdown in the production line. When one of the machines encounters a problem, the supervisor immediately stops the line and calls in a technician to work on the machine. In the meantime, the workers wait at their positions until the line starts again. Once the problem is fixed, the speed of the line is sometimes increased to make up for the lost time.

As high line speeds reduce the space for workers, there are greater chances for injuries as workers struggle to keep up and avoid coming into contact with their co-workers:

“We can barely grab the pieces and have to work in reduced spaces, we have to watch out not to be cut.”

(Pork worker in Minnesota)

“We are packed in a small space, there is not enough space, we are shoulder to shoulder, there is no room to move, some cut in one direction, others in the other, the chances to harm a co-worker are high, there are some areas where the workers are too close to each other.”

(Worker in Iowa)

Workers on the production line said that they were unable to physically keep up with extreme line speeds. This resulted in a variety of injuries from which workers would likely suffer for the rest of their lives:

“I cannot even bend my fingers; I have destroyed my hands and harmed my body.”
(Worker in Minnesota)

The fast pace of the line contributes to repetitive motion injuries that are so devastating for workers. Workers also complained that work left them not only physically harmed but also tired and exhausted at the end of the day:

“Many workers are harmed, there is [not] enough time to do our tasks, the speed is so fast and we have to stretch ourselves to do the pieces. We are always working beyond the capacity of our bodies.”
(Worker in Iowa)

By preventing workers from sharpening their knives, reducing space to work and causing workers to rush, the rapid speed of the line exacerbates potentially dangerous conditions in meat and poultry plants. As focus group participants suggested, this makes it more likely that workers will injure themselves or their co-workers. These injuries are often serious, and cause lasting damage to workers.

EXPOSURE TO CHEMICALS

Participants in this study also reported injuries from exposure to dangerous substances. Chemicals, especially ammonia, are common in meatpacking and processing plants, where they are used to kill bacteria and maintain a clean workplace. Workers confirmed that they attended a short training session about chemicals when they are hired, which was sometimes conducted in English and sometimes in Spanish. As a result of the training, workers perceived chemicals as dangerous and generally knew about their harmful properties. However, many workers said that they did not feel protected from exposure to chemicals:

“In these types of jobs we use chemicals a lot. The word danger is there, we do not use masks. I think we should because the smell is very strong. Sometimes we have to go out to breathe fresh air because we cannot breathe. It is dangerous... I am positive chemicals harm us.”

(Worker in Minnesota)

Exposure to chemicals not only harms the respiratory system but can also lead to burns.

This is particularly the case for many workers who do not wear safety equipment. When asked why they generally do not use adequate safety equipment, some workers blamed the lack of dispatchers at the distribution center and said that they were reluctant to wait in line for safety gear before work because they are not on the clock. Others tended to disregard safety issues, thinking that accidents will not happen to them:

“Sometimes workers forget, but even using the equipment, we can have accidents, for example a big piece can [fall] from the hooks and workers can be hurt. If tools are not in good condition it is the same.”

(Worker in Minnesota)

Safety equipment is also important because workers are exposed to very high and low temperatures inside processing plants. For instance, participants described working with a hose with extremely hot water that could potentially burn them. Cleaning workers also said that they have to follow the rules and carefully handle chemicals, even if they do not know much about the type of chemical or its effects. Workers are also occasionally exposed to chemicals even if they do not work directly with them, and several focus group participants reported feeling faint after ammonia spills in the plants:

“I passed out; I was washing the band where the turkeys are killed with gas. I don't know too much about it, or if it is related to the gas, but if you are cleaning that band and get splashed with that water, it harms you.”

(Worker in Minnesota)

Participants also reported frequent exposure to infected tissues, blood and other substances from dead animals. Workers occasionally performed their tasks while standing in a pool of blood. They also became soaking wet from fluids, often continuing to work their entire shift with dirty and bloody clothes. Workers in the focus groups complained about the headaches and dizziness that resulted from working with these substances, and expressed concerns about becoming infected with animal diseases:

“Every day [the] same thing, at the end of the day I have to wash myself to get rid of the blood and dirt I have over my body. It is not pleasant.”
(Worker in Minnesota)

DISCRIMINATION AND EXPLOITATION

Although workers complained about the pain and exhaustion associated with work in processing plants, they often assumed that this was the price of having a job. Many workers expressed concerns about losing their jobs if they report injuries or complain about working conditions, and undocumented workers faced an additional layer of fear. As a result, workers that are injured on the production line often continue to work:

“Many of us are working without documents and they know. If we complain [the supervisors] take us to the office, that is why we do not complain.”
(Worker in Minnesota)

“...we have to keep working in silence and not say anything because we need the job.”
(Worker in Iowa)

“My coworker badly harmed her wrist. Her knife was dull, her hand got inflamed. She didn’t say anything because she wanted to keep her job.”
(Poultry worker in Iowa)

Even though undocumented workers are protected by labor and civil rights laws, in practice they are extremely vulnerable. In meatpacking plants, the fear of retaliation by supervisors keeps workers silent even when they are injured or are faced with unpleasant working conditions.

Undocumented workers described suffering from a disparity in benefits and assigned more onerous tasks within meatpacking plants. Again, immigration status and fear of repercussions by supervisors plays an important role in facilitating unequal and exploitative treatment of workers:

“They treat us (Latino undocumented) different and privilege others because we cannot freely denounce them.”
(Worker in Minnesota)

Focus group participants also reported that their pay checks commonly do not reflect the correct number of hours worked. However, undocumented workers are hesitant to complain because of their relative powerlessness at work and their sense that the problem could not be resolved:

“Once they didn’t pay me all the hours I worked, I was mad and complained. I told them I worked more hours and my supervisor said: next week you are going to get the difference. Then nothing happened; on the contrary they took more hours away from my pay check and never got the right salary.”
(Worker in Iowa)

CONCLUSIONS

This study describes the experiences of meatpacking and poultry processing workers in the Midwest. During in-depth focus group interviews, 36 Latino and immigrant workers across beef, pork and poultry industries in Iowa and Minnesota described their working conditions and identified a series of health and safety concerns. Workers reported that serious cuts and repetitive motion injuries are common throughout meat and poultry plants. Notably, workers linked these injuries to the rapid speed of the production line. Workers also told researchers that they are exposed to chemicals and other dangerous substances. While training and safety equipment is often available, it is generally inadequate in the fast-paced environment of the

meatpacking industry. Finally, workers said that they frequently experienced abuse from supervisors, and undocumented workers described additional vulnerability within the workplace.

These results confirm previous research by member organizations of the Midwest Coalition for Human Rights. In more than 600 surveys conducted across Nebraska and Minnesota (Nebraska Appleseed 2009; Frey et al. 2009), workers identified the speed of the production line as their primary concern. Over the past decade, advocates in other parts of the country have also highlighted growing concerns about the relationship between rapid line speeds and higher injury rates in the meatpacking industry (Human Rights Watch 2004). Our in-depth interviews across two states confirm that work speed and workers' injuries continue to be a serious problem in the industry and fail to live up to Midwestern standards for safety and dignity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ***The USDA should withdraw its proposed poultry inspection rule.***

The U.S. Department of Agriculture and the White House have proposed new poultry inspection rules that would allow many plants to speed up processing lines. By expanding a pilot program already underway, the proposed rule would eliminate many of the federally charged inspectors, instead relying on workers to catch defects as birds traveled past them at a rate of three birds per second. In some plants, processing speeds may increase from 70 birds per minute to 175, pressuring an already overstretched worker to even higher rates of speed with greater potential for accidents, injuries, and unsafe food.

- ***Congress should reinstate ergonomics standards to prevent repetitive motion injuries.***

In 2000, OSHA implemented new ergonomics standards to prevent and avoid serious repetitive motion injuries, but the standards were subsequently overturned in 2001 by the Bush Administration and Congress (Human Rights Watch 2004). The standards focused on the significant risk of musculoskeletal disorders that plague industrial workplaces, including the meatpacking and poultry processing industries.

- ***Congress and OSHA should develop new regulations to reduce work speed in meatpacking and poultry processing plants to reasonable, safe levels.***

Immediate steps should be taken to ensure that line speeds are designed and regulated to improve worker safety while also ensuring the food safety of meat that is sold to consumers. The federal government should work through OSHA and USDA to create a standard for production line speed and an adequate number of workers on the line. This effort should build on previous instances where federal officials have already recognized the importance of slower line speeds. In a recent GAO report (2005) OSHA officials suggested that slowing the production line could help reduce injuries for meatpacking workers.

- ***OSHA should enforce existing regulations on chemical exposure and required trainings.***

Employers must be held accountable for posting information and providing adequate trainings for workers about the dangers posed by chemicals in meatpacking plants.

- ***Effective regulation of meatpacking and poultry processing plants is needed to protect the rights and safety of workers and consumers.***

Increased productivity in meat and poultry plants have not led to safer food - in fact, quite the opposite. In recent years, U.S. consumers have seen hundreds of thousands of pounds of meat products recalled due to contamination by E. coli. People across the country but especially those most vulnerable like children and the elderly have become severely ill or, in rare cases, have died after coming in contact with contaminated food that makes its way through meat and poultry processing plants. Slowing down the line and improving oversight will help to ensure that the meat we consume is safe.

Regulation of meatpacking plants must occur at both the federal and state level. During the past decade two Midwestern states, Nebraska and Minnesota, have implemented state legislation on meatpacking. While this legislation is an important first step, our findings and previous research (Nebraska Appleseed 2009; Frey et al. 2009) demonstrate that existing regulations should be strengthened and more effectively enforced. For instance, despite efforts to improve worker safety, the overwhelming majority of meatpacking workers surveyed in Nebraska and Minnesota reported that the speed of the line had actually increased in recent years. In order to address dangerous working conditions and high injury rates, funding should be increased for both federal and state safety oversight and enforcement of meat and poultry plant safety. More inspectors should be hired, and federal and state agencies should have the ability to conduct random, unannounced inspections.

Midwestern states should require employers to institute mandatory breaks, stretching and job rotation to lessen the effect of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). They should also ensure that meatpacking workers have adequate safety equipment, including protective equipment for eyes, face, head, and extremities, protective clothing,

respiratory devices, and protective shields and barriers, to do their job. Workers also must be given an opportunity to sharpen their knives as they work. Improved safety regulations can be further strengthened through the creation of worker safety committees that can work with management to address hazards.

- ***Federal and State Government must enforce anti-retaliation laws***

It is also essential that Midwestern states take steps to prevent discrimination in meatpacking plants. Workers should never feel threatened in the workplace, especially when reporting an accident or injury. Federal and state officials should enforce anti-retaliation laws, which are designed to protect a worker's employment so that she does not feel intimidated as a result of filing charges against her employer. Immigrant workers, especially those without documentation, should be explicitly protected from threats of deportation in order to ensure safety for all. Employers should provide greater training to managers and supervisors to ensure understanding of these anti-retaliation laws and to promote a less hostile working environment for employees. By encouraging supervisors and workers to report injuries and safety concerns, employers and regulating agencies can help improve safety in meatpacking plants.

- ***Midwestern states must improve outreach to workers.***

Nebraska Appleseed (2009) found that the overwhelming majority of meatpacking workers in Nebraska surveyed (91 percent) knew they had rights, but less than 30 percent thought those rights made a difference. Researchers at the University of Minnesota study similarly found that the Packinghouse Bill of Rights had not been effective in informing Minnesota workers about their rights (Frey, et al. 2009). More

worryingly, more than half of the workers surveyed said that the existence of workers' rights in the plants made little to no difference in their lives.

In order to address these concerns, federal and state agencies and employers must do a better job of disseminating information about workers' rights in meatpacking plants. In states with existing legislation on meatpacking, workers' Bill of Rights should be posted in each plant in the native languages of the workers and distributed to them individually, either at work or with their paychecks. Midwestern states should also follow the example of Nebraska and fund a meatpacking workers' rights coordinator to answer worker questions and conduct inspections.

Improving working conditions and enforcing rights in meatpacking plants will be a difficult task. Workers frequently mentioned that they were fearful of reporting injuries, making it unlikely that they will be able to alert companies or inspections to unsafe working conditions. Thus, in order to guarantee that workers' rights and safety are respected and ensured in meatpacking plants, which is something that benefits us all, it is essential not only to implement and improve regulations, but also to create an environment where workers do not feel threatened or vulnerable. Workers and their communities, who are bearing the costs of increased productivity and profits for meatpacking companies, should have a say in how fast the line moves. Employers should also ensure that lines are adequately staffed and continue to provide training and up-to-date protective equipment for their employees. By ensuring that the concerns of workers are taken into account, the meatpacking industry can protect and improve safety for both workers and consumers.

REFERENCES

- Broadway, M. J. and Stull, D. D. (2008). "I'll Do Whatever You Want, but It Hurts": Worker Safety and Community Health in Modern Meatpacking. *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas*, 5(2), 27-37.
- Champling, D., Hake, E. (2006). Immigration as Industrial Strategy in American Meat Packing. *Review of Political Economy*, 18(1), 49-69.
- Commons, J. R. (1904). Labor Conditions in Meat Packing and the Recent Strike. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 19(1), 1-32.
- Dalla, R. L., Elis, A., and Cramer, S.C. (2005). Immigration and Rural America: Latinos' perceptions of work and residence in three meatpacking communities. *Community, Work and Family*, 8(2), 163-185.
- Dalla, R. L. and Christensen, A. (2005). Latino Immigrants Describe Residence in Rural Midwestern Meatpacking Communities: A Longitudinal Assessment of Social and Economic Change. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 27(1), 23-42.
- Fennelly, K., and Leitner, H. (2002). *How the Food Processing Industry is Diversifying Rural Minnesota* (Working Paper No. 59). Julian Zamora Research Institute.
- Frey, B. A., Strunk, C., and Erickson, A. (2009). Meatpacking in Minnesota: An Assessment of the Packinghouse Bill of Rights. *Workday Minnesota*. December.
- Gabriel, J. (2008). Si, Se Puede: Organizing Latino Immigrant Workers in South Omaha's Meatpacking Industry. *Journal of Labor Research*, 29, 68-87.
- Goveia, L. and Stull D. D. (1997). *Latino Immigrants, Meat Packing, and Rural Communities: A Case Study of Lexington* (Nebraska Research Report No. 26). Julian Zamora Research Institute

- Grey, M. (1997). Secondary Labor in the Meatpacking Industry: Demographic Change and Student Mobility in Rural Iowa Schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 13(3), 153-164.
- Grey, M. and Woodrick, A. C. (2002). Unofficial Sister Cities: Meat Packing Labor Migration Between Villachuato, Mexico and Marshalltown, Iowa. *Human Organization*, 61(4), 364–376.
- Gorsche, R. G., Wiley, J. P., Renger, R. F., Brant, R. F., Gerner, T. Y., and Sasyniuk, T. M. (1999). Prevalence and incidence of carpal tunnel syndrome in a meat packing plant. *Occupational Environmental Medicine*, 56, 417-422.
- Gouveia, L. and Saenz, R. (2000). Global Forces and Latino Population Growth in the Midwest: A Regional and Subregional Analysis. *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*, 10, 305-328.
- Horowitz, R. (1997). *"Negro and white, unite and fight!": a social history of industrial unionism in meatpacking, 1930-90*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Human Rights Watch (2004) *Blood Sweat and Fear. Workers' Rights in U.S. Meat and Poultry Plants*. Human Rights' Watch New York, N.Y.
- Nebraska Appleseed (2009) *The Speed Kills You: The Voice of Nebraska's Meatpacking Workers*. Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest. Lincoln, Nebraska.
- Passel, J. S. 2006. "The Size and Characteristics of the Unauthorized Migrant Population in the U.S. Estimates Based on the March 2005 Current Population Survey." Pew Hispanic Center, March 7.
- Striffler, S. (2005) *Chicken: The Dangerous Transformation of America's Favorite Food*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

- Stull, D. D., Broadway, M. J., and Erickson, K. C. (1992). The Price of a Good Steak: Beef Packing and its Consequences for Garden City, Kansas. In L. Lamphere (Ed.), *Structuring Diversity: Ethnographic Perspectives on the New Immigration* (pp. 35-64). Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Stull, D. D. and Broadway, M. J. (2004). *Slaughterhouse Blues: The Meat and Poultry Industry in North America*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- . (1995). Killing them softly: Work in meat packing plants and what it does to workers. In D. D. Stull, M. J. Broadway, and D. C. Griffith (Eds.), *Any way you cut it: Meat processing and small town America* (pp. 61-84). Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.