

# **Meatpacking in Minnesota:**

## **An Assessment of the Packinghouse Bill of Rights**

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### **Introduction**

Meatpacking is one of the most dangerous jobs in America. Workers perform repetitive tasks, often working with sharp knives, along a quickly moving production line. They must deal with loud noises while working in extreme hot and cold temperatures and lifting heavy animals. As a result, workers often suffer from repetitive motion injuries such as carpal tunnel and tendonitis, and occasionally sustain more serious injuries like cuts and, more rarely, amputations. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the injury rate in the meatpacking industry in 2007 was more than twice the national average for manufacturing jobs. In Minnesota, the incidence rate was slightly lower than the national average (10.4 meatpacking workers are injured or become sick in Minnesota for every 100 full-time employees, as opposed to 12.1 nationally), but it is still well above the rate for all manufacturing jobs in the state (5.1 per 100 full-time employees), according to the 2007 Bureau of Labor Statistics Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses.

In response to concerns about the working conditions in meatpacking plants, in 2007 the Minnesota State Legislature passed a Packinghouse Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights requires employers to inform meatpacking workers about their rights. It also mandates that employers provide workers with adequate equipment and information about the requirements of jobs in meatpacking plants. To establish a baseline on conditions in Minnesota's plants and to assess the initial impact of the Packinghouse Bill of Rights on the lives of workers, researchers from the

Human Rights Program at the University of Minnesota conducted more than 50 surveys of current and former meatpacking workers throughout Minnesota. Our findings show that workers' primary concerns about conditions were the increasing speed of the production line and the association of line speed with workplace injuries. The surveys also established that, so far, the Bill of Rights has not been effective in informing workers about their rights or noticeably transforming working conditions in the meatpacking industry. Almost none of the workers surveyed had heard of the Packinghouse Bill of Rights. Even more worrying, more than half of the workers said that the existence of workers' rights in the plants made little to no difference in their lives. In order to protect the rights of meatpacking workers, greater efforts must be made to inform workers about their rights and to increase workers' voices regarding safe conditions in the workplace.

### **Meatpacking in the Midwest**

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the meatpacking industry was largely concentrated in urban centers like Chicago, Kansas City, Omaha, and St. Paul. Live animals were shipped via railroads to large factories in cities, where they were prepared as dressed meat and then sent across the country. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the meatpacking industry had become highly concentrated, with five firms controlling most of the slaughter and transportation of meat. Although plant owners made concerted efforts to discourage unionization, by the 1940s workers and labor unions had won industry-wide labor standards and contracts.

The development of refrigerated railroad cars and an expanded railroad network allowed some meat processing plants to emerge in smaller Midwestern towns during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Pork processing plants in particular have a long history in Iowa and in

southern Minnesota towns like Austin. In the 1960s, however, the geography of the meatpacking industry was dramatically transformed as large operations set up shop in the rural Midwest to cut down on transportation costs and bypass urban labor unions. New processors revolutionized the meatpacking industry by locating their operations in rural areas close to the cattle supply and by shipping de-boned and trimmed “boxed beef” directly to supermarkets. Meatpacking companies further lowered production costs by replacing butchers with low-skilled workers performing repetitive tasks along a “disassembly line,” and by employing non-union labor.

In order to remain competitive, most urban meatpacking plants eventually relocated to small towns in the rural Midwest. The relocation from cities with strong unions to rural areas, often in “right-to-work” states (which allow non-union workers to benefit from union contracts without paying dues), led to a decline in union rolls. Older plants in the rural Midwest went out of business or sought concessions from workers, either through negotiations or by shutting down temporarily and reopening with lower wages and without union contracts. Currently, around 20 percent of meatpacking workers nationally are unionized, a steep decline from 46 percent in 1980.

The restructuring of meatpacking has produced a highly concentrated industry, although today the industry leaders are massive corporations like ConAgra, Cargill, Hormel, and Tyson. While this concentration has led to greater profitability for some companies, it has had a largely negative impact on workers. Since the 1960s, working conditions and wages have deteriorated. During the 1970s, meatpacking wages exceeded the average pay for all manufacturing occupations, but by 2006 meatpacking wages were almost 30 percent below the average manufacturing wage. As working conditions declined, employers have largely turned to immigrant labor to fill positions in meatpacking plants across the Midwest. According to the

United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), more than half of workers in meatpacking plants in the U.S. are now immigrants. In Minnesota, meatpacking workers are mostly from Central America, particularly Mexico and Guatemala, East Africa (Somalia and the Sudan) and Southeast Asia.

## **Methodology**

Between 2007 and 2009, researchers from the Human Rights Program at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities conducted surveys of 51 currently employed or former workers in meatpacking plants in Minnesota. Although meatpacking workers tend to work in multiple processing plants, the surveys focused on workers in two poultry plants, two beef plants, and one pork plants. The surveys were entirely voluntary and were administered in English, Spanish, or Somali. Workers were asked 40 questions about workers' rights, the observations of workers about their employer and union, training procedures, and safety conditions. Each survey took between 30 minutes and one hour to complete. Workers were not paid to participate in the study.

## **Survey findings**

Our surveys found that the Minnesota Packinghouse Bill of Rights has done little to inform meatpacking workers about their rights. More than two-thirds (67.3 percent) of workers surveyed had not heard of the Packinghouse Workers Bill of Rights. Only 20 percent of workers were able to confirm that the bill is posted in the plant, and several workers told us specifically that the bill is not posted in their native language. Despite the noticeable absence of the Bill of Rights from plants, most meatpacking workers (85 percent) surveyed were aware that they had rights more generally. Several workers found that knowing these rights allowed them to be more

assertive with their supervisors, particularly in terms of demanding additional help for jobs that should be done by two people, which is becoming increasingly common in meatpacking plants. However, most respondents did not think that workers' rights made an important difference in their work lives, and nearly 40 percent of workers surveyed said that rights had no impact. One worker told us that while "It helps to know my rights . . . in this company [the] employee's rights are only theoretical. They are not practiced or enforced." Another worker said that, "We know we have rights but when we try to claim them they are denied." Workers in unionized plants were ambivalent about the impact of union representatives, with slightly more than half of interviewees saying that their union representative was helpful. These comments suggest a potentially serious concern for advocates of meatpacking workers in Minnesota. As health and safety problems continue to exist in meatpacking plants (and in many cases worsen), it appears that some workers are becoming skeptical about the efficacy of workers' rights.

The biggest source of worker frustration centered around the speed of the production line in meatpacking plants. Line speeds vary based on the type of meat (beef, pork or poultry) being processed, the size and age of the plant and other factors, making it difficult to draw comparisons between plants. However, since the 1970s, companies have generally sought to increase productivity in meatpacking plants by increasing the speed of the line. Meatpacking workers across multiple plants in Minnesota expressed serious concerns about line speed. Among meatpacking workers with more than five years of experience, a clear majority (60 percent) said that line speed has increased over the last five years. An even greater number (84 percent) of workers said that line speed had increased even more in the last one or two years. As line speed has increased, workers told researchers that fewer people have been assigned to positions on the line, which increases the workload on the remaining workers.

As a number of studies have demonstrated, line speed is an important issue for meatpacking workers because of its relationship to workplace injuries. The workers interviewed for this study were ambivalent about whether injuries had increased during the last one to two years. Almost 27 percent of workers thought that the injury rate had stayed the same, 33 percent thought injuries had decreased somewhat (only one worker told us that injuries had decreased a lot), while 35 percent thought injuries had increased somewhat or lot. Despite this ambivalence, slightly over half of the workers surveyed had experienced or witnessed injuries in the plants, and a number of workers connected injuries directly to line speed. As one worker put it, “it isn’t safe because the line is very fast – twice as fast as it was last year.” Many workers told us stories of horrific workplace accidents. One worker told us, “I work where they kill cows. There is a table and it was tipped, there is not a good protector, the pistol shot him in the leg. He told the supervisors it was dangerous but they didn’t change it until he got hurt.” Others described accidents with knives and the machinery in the plant.

While such injuries are dramatic examples of the unsafe working conditions in meatpacking plants, repetitive motion injuries are much more common among workers. Several workers told us about experiencing back and shoulder pain that prevented them from working. Although these injuries develop gradually, they can debilitate workers, disrupting their lives even after they stop working at meatpacking plants. Workers complained that they were having trouble sleeping or, in one heartbreaking case, playing with their children as a result of shoulder and back injuries.

### **Worker recommendations**

Not surprisingly, workers have a number of ideas about how to improve working and safety conditions in meatpacking plants. In response to an open-ended question about making the workplace safer, a majority of the workers interviewed for this study put forth the same suggestion: slow the line. As one worker told us, “the speed of the line should be slowed down, so a person can keep up with it, because the speed has been increasing for the past four years.” Most workers are aware of the intense pressure to keep the line speed fast, and offered another suggestion if their call for slower line speeds could not be heeded: more workers on the line. As one worker said, “If the line is fast, more people need to be on the line.” Finally, a number of workers suggested that their company hire more supervisors for their shifts and provide better equipment.

## **Conclusion**

Our surveys show that more effective regulation of meatpacking plants in Minnesota is needed to protect the rights of workers. Notably, the Minnesota State Commissioner of Labor and Industry and employers must do a better job of disseminating information about workers’ rights in meatpacking plants. The Packinghouse 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. The Minnesota State Legislature should also follow the example of Nebraska, which adopted a Meatpacking Bill of Rights in 2000, and fund a meatpacking workers’ rights coordinator. According to Nebraska Appleseed, a legal advocacy group, the meatpacking workers’ rights coordinator has been effective in educating and giving a voice to workers. Beyond the dissemination of information about workers’ rights, reforms are needed to improve the safety of workers. The clearest cause of worker injuries is the rapidly moving production

line, which is increasing with each year. Steps should be taken to ensure that line speeds in Minnesota plants are designed to improve worker safety and the quality of meat that is sold to consumers. Workers, who are bearing the costs of increased productivity and profits for meatpacking companies, should have a say in how fast the line moves. Companies should also ensure that lines are adequately staffed and continue to provide training and up-to-date protective equipment for their employees. The Minnesota Packinghouse Bill of Rights represents a potentially important step forward for meatpacking workers and their advocates, but it needs to be supported with improved outreach to workers about their rights and active enforcement to ensure safe workplaces.