

“COVID-19 outbreaks in meatpacking plants . . . cast a new light on the steady erosion of the meat industry’s working conditions over the past four decades.”

# The Meat Industry Goes Back to the Jungle

WILSON J. WARREN

In his 1906 novel *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair illuminated the abuse and exploitation of meatpacking workers in Chicago through the experiences of Jurgis Rudkus, a Lithuanian immigrant. Before taking a job cleaning the “killing beds,” Jurgis goes on a public tour of a slaughterhouse (the meat industry no longer provides such tours) and reflects on how the men “worked with furious intensity, literally upon the run—at a pace with which there is nothing to be compared except a football game.” Later, after obtaining employment, Jurgis describes his frustrations with a lack of safety measures that left workers exposed to injury. He says that every department of the plant “was a separate little inferno” and “each of them had their own peculiar diseases.” The packers comprised “representative[s] of several races that . . . displaced each other in the stockyards,” each new group representing “cheaper labor” than the preceding group.

Just over a century later, COVID-19 outbreaks in the United States’ meat industry have riveted the public’s attention on meatpacking workers once again. To be sure, much of the media coverage focused on how these outbreaks affected meat supplies and prices. Given that upward of 20 percent of all slaughter and meatpacking facilities in the United States had to shut down for some period of time, the public was rightly concerned. Still, Americans have been alarmed and even outraged at the large number of positive cases among workers.

The US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported that in just April and May 2020, 264 meatpacking facilities in 23 states counted 17,358 COVID-19 cases, including 91 deaths. Another 1,600 workers who tested positive in four Iowa

meatpacking plants, including a Tyson pork processing facility in Perry where over 58 percent tested positive, were not included in the CDC report. Well over half of the nationwide cases in the industry were among Hispanic workers.

COVID-19 outbreaks in Europe’s meat industry were not nearly as severe, but still were serious. In early June, at least 2,670 coronavirus cases had been reported and four workers had died. Most cases occurred in Germany and Ireland, but Britain, Spain, France, Italy, and the Netherlands all had outbreaks. The worst ones occurred in meatpacking facilities in Gütersloh, North Rhine–Westphalia, Germany; Azambuja, Portugal; Kirkcaldy, England; and the Welsh towns of Anglesey, Merthyr Tydfil, and Wrexham. Elsewhere, a JBS plant in Wyndham, Australia, also had a severe outbreak.

Generally speaking, European Union member nations have developed stronger labor rights protections and more effective environmental and animal rights safeguards. Many commentators believed that long before the pandemic, meat workers were better protected in Europe. Meatpacking line speeds, for instance, are typically much slower there. And during the pandemic, European governments, especially in Germany, focused more attention on protecting workers than the United States did. Yet the meat workers most affected everywhere by COVID-19 outbreaks have been immigrants.

When the Dillingham Commission issued its report on immigrants in the US meat industry in 1911, it found that Poles, Lithuanians, and Slovaks made up half of Chicago’s workers. More than a hundred years later, immigrants—now primarily from Latin America—still make up about half of the American meat industry’s workforce. Non-native workers also have a large presence in meatpacking plants in much of Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.

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WILSON J. WARREN is a professor of history at Western Michigan University. His latest book is *Meat Makes People Powerful: A Global History of the Modern Era* (University of Iowa Press, 2018).

While the COVID-19 outbreaks in meatpacking plants in North America and Europe during the spring and early summer of 2020 are part of the tragic tale of the pandemic's devastating effects, they also cast a new light on the steady erosion of the meat industry's working conditions over the past four decades. The history of labor rights in the meat industry is a story of improvements through the mid-twentieth century, followed by constant diminution of benefits and protections. The most recent developments are tied to emaciated labor union movements, increasing government indifference, and the rise of globalized trade and labor sourcing.

Around the world, as states acted to protect consumers from dangerous meat products during the early twentieth century, they typically also backed efforts to improve meat workers' conditions through legal protections for labor union formation. This support peaked during the World War II era. However, as transnational corporations assumed dominant positions in the ensuing period of free trade and deregulation, reliance on foreign-born meat workers once again became prevalent in the United States, much of Europe, Australia, and New Zealand by the end of the century. Lack of state protection and increasing social hostility toward immigrant meat workers is now widespread.

## OUTCAST BUTCHERS

Prejudice against meat workers has deep roots around the globe. In the West, at least since the Middle Ages, butchers were associated with urban nuisances like water pollution and noxious odors. The seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke, among others, stated that butchers were brutal and violent by nature. Locke opined that "they who delight in the suffering and destruction of inferior creatures will not be apt to be very compassionate or benign to those of their own kind."

In Japan, the Buraku, an outcast hereditary status group that included people who butchered animals and made leather products, faced enduring discrimination. Tokugawa-era (1603–1868) legal codes combined with Shinto and Buddhist taboos concerning blood, filth, and death to result in employment, housing, and even marriage discrimination well into the twentieth

century, despite the fact that Burakumin status was officially abolished in 1871 during the Meiji Restoration.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, concerns about the brutality of animal slaughter in Europe and North America led to the development of both humane slaughter techniques and increasing support for animal rights. But workers' conditions remained mostly unchanged.

Grassroots movements prodded governments to extend protections to meat workers. In the US meat industry, ethnic and racial tensions were widespread in the early 1900s. When the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), called a nationwide strike in 1904, meat companies recruited an estimated 10,000 to 18,000 African American replacement workers in Chicago alone. One AFL leader said the Black strikebreakers were "huge, strapping fellows, ignorant and vicious, whose predominating trait was animalism." The Amalgamated union president, Michael Donnelly, claimed that in East St. Louis, "cattle are being assassinated, not butchered" by Black strikebreakers.

Despite white animosity, Black workers had become increasingly important in the American meat industry by the time of the major labor union drives of the AFL and

the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s and 1940s. The passage of the National Labor Relations Act (known as the Wagner Act) in 1935 encouraged union leaders to build an interracial United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA-CIO), with Black leadership in major urban centers. The UPWA became one of the most important interracial unions in US history.

In Western Europe, state support for public slaughterhouses gave butchers control over their workplace conditions. This was especially notable in La Villette, the primary public slaughterhouse in late-nineteenth-century Paris, where authorities protected traditional butchering practices.

In both Australia and New Zealand, state support for export marketing was linked to union formation and compulsory arbitration between employers and employees through the 1970s. The Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union was successful in works council-based representation, a form of industrial unionism in which local employees exercise relatively large influence. The

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New Zealand Meat Workers' Union and regional Freezing Workers' Unions benefited the increasing number of Māori and Pacific Islanders working in the industry.

After Japan's Meiji government issued the 1871 Emancipation Edict abolishing Burakumin status, little changed until, starting in the 1890s, Buraku representatives pursued political activity that resulted in the 1922 formation of the *Zenkoku Suiheisha*, or National Levelers Association, a political pressure group advocating for Buraku rights. After the founding of the Buraku Liberation League (BLL) in 1955, the Japanese government intervened over the next twenty years to provide protections in public-sector meat production centers where Buraku were disproportionately employed. It took the efforts of both the BLL and unions such as the All-Shibaura Slaughterhouse Employee Association for Buraku and other meat workers to secure greater workplace rights in the 1960s and 1970s in Osaka and Yokohama, two important meat industry centers employing many Burakumin.

## AN INDUSTRY REVOLUTION

Starting in the 1960s, the American meat industry underwent enormous economic changes. Companies new to the industry, especially Iowa Beef Packers (IBP), purchased or supplanted older corporate giants over the subsequent three decades. Tyson, a longtime chicken processor, acquired IBP in 2001; ConAgra became a major packing corporation through its acquisition of Monfort and Swift in the 1980s; and Cargill bought Excel. These three major packers revolutionized the industry with new livestock purchasing practices, the use of new workplace technologies such as electric circular knives and a variety of circular and band saws, and consolidation of cutting and packaging operations. Beef packers moved their facilities closer to livestock supplies in small towns in the Great Plains, whereas poultry packers proliferated in isolated regions of the South.

In the middle third of the twentieth century, when union-building improved wages, benefits, and working conditions, most meat workers were native-born whites and Blacks. During the 1980s, companies aggressively recruited workers from Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa. Although the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act was meant to stop the flow of undocumented immigrants, lax enforcement of employer sanctions combined with ever-increasing demand

for cheap labor helped facilitate the transition to immigrant workforces. Penalties for employers relying on undocumented workers were so weak that the law effectively encouraged their use in meatpacking and other industries. Between 1980 and 2005, two of every five people who moved to the Midwest came from Latin America. In Arkansas, for instance, where the poultry industry grew rapidly, the Latinx population increased by 337 percent between 1990 and 2000. By 2015, 40 percent of all meatpacking workers in the United States were Latinx.

The US meat industry's transformation from a relatively safe, well-paying industry employing primarily native-born white and Black people into an increasingly dangerous, low-paying industry employing a large number of immigrants occurred between 1960 and 1990. In 1960, meat industry wages amounted to 121 percent of average manufacturing wages. By 1990, that figure had dropped to 84 percent.

Greatly weakened meatpacking unionism was largely responsible for this collapse. IBP and other packers negotiated lower wage rates in beef plants throughout the 1970s. The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), formed in 1979 by a merger between the Retail Clerks International and the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen, which had absorbed the UPWA in 1968, rapidly lost membership in the 1980s. Even in its remaining unionized plants, the UFCW could not maintain previous wage rates in its master agreements, which included all unionized worksites across the industry.

During the 1980s, as unions lost strength, meatpacking became notorious for the worst safety record of any US industry. Injuries occurred at a rate four times the national average. Carpal tunnel injuries due to use of electric-powered killing and cutting machines, together with faster line speeds, made up 48 percent of all the nation's occupational injuries by the end of the 1980s. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) investigations demonstrated that meat companies went to great lengths to cover up injuries.

The August 1985–June 1986 UFCW P-9 strike at the Hormel plant in Austin, Minnesota, became emblematic of the deteriorating status of workers in the industry. When Hormel announced a 23 percent wage cut, Local P-9, which had been one of the early militant UPWA-CIO locals, went on strike. But the UFCW decided not to support the strike. The international union's decision to turn

its back on a striking local union was unprecedented in the industry's history. The UFCW's strategy was to try to bring up wages at plants with lower pay scales. Because Hormel already had a relatively high base wage rate, the union decided not to support Local P-9's demand to retain it.

P-9 not only went forward with its strike, but also pursued a corporate shaming campaign and boycott against Hormel and First Bank System, which included several Hormel executives on its board. The campaign encouraged depositors to withdraw their money from the bank. Although P-9's effort drew considerable support from pro-labor groups across the country, it did not stop Hormel from reopening the plant and hiring replacement workers, who were largely Mexican. When the strike ended after ten months, only about 20 percent of the strikers got their jobs back, and the new contract provided no concessions to Local P-9's demands.

## DIGNITY DENIED

Journalist Lynn Waltz's 2018 book *Hog Wild*, on the labor battles at Smithfield Foods' hog slaughtering facility in Tar Heel, North Carolina, provides vivid insights into the lengths to which contemporary meat companies have been willing to go to stymie workers' efforts to improve their wages and gain workplace dignity. Traditionally, the Midwest had been the center of the US pork industry. But as Midwestern residents battled hog producers over environmental concerns during the 1980s, much of the industry shifted to North Carolina.

After Smithfield established the Tar Heel facility in 1992, the work force was primarily Black. Despite North Carolina's long history of "right-to-work" policies, whereby unionized workers were legally allowed to opt out of paying full union dues, workers organized a local branch of the UFCW. They narrowly lost an August 1994 certification election, which would have given the UFCW local authorization to bargain with Smithfield.

By the 1990s, the number of Hispanic immigrants in North Carolina and much of the South and Midwest had boomed. Between 1990 and 2000, the Latinx population of the state grew by nearly 400 percent. The share of Hispanics employed at the Tar Heel plant jumped from 12 to 25 percent in just three years, from 1994 to 1997.

Plant managers attempted to intimidate Black union supporters by threatening to replace them with Latinos.

Despite concerted efforts to gain Hispanic support for the next National Labor Relations Board (NLRB)-supervised union election in August 1997, the UFCW local lost another close vote. An NLRB ruling issued in 2000 found that Smithfield managers had resorted to a variety of illegal tactics, such as calling in police to interfere with union organizing, firing workers, deploying private security guards to assault workers, inciting fights, and threatening pro-union immigrant workers with deportation. The company's appeals stymied NLRB and district court pro-worker rulings. Not until 2006 did the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit uphold the NLRB's earlier ruling in favor of workers. Despite disruptive Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids targeting Tar Heel plant workers and a racketeering lawsuit filed by Smithfield against the UFCW and several supporting organizations in 2007, the local finally won certification in December 2008, more than fourteen years after its first attempt.

Declining wages and rising injury rates were bad enough, but meatpacking workers, as well as many other workers

across the United States, also had to endure the indignity of being denied the right to use a bathroom. After OSHA was formed in 1971, it issued about 5,000 safety standards, including a requirement that employers provide bathrooms at workplaces, but it did not attempt to enforce workers' right to use them whenever they needed to. Employers typically interpreted the OSHA standard to mean that workers could take bathroom breaks during designated break times, but not necessarily at any point in the work day. Attorney Marc Linder took up workers' complaints about this OSHA regulation and coauthored a book titled *Void Where Prohibited: Rest Breaks and the Right to Urinate on Company Time*, published in 1997. Along with union protests, his advocacy resulted in OSHA stipulating in 1998 that workers had a right to use the bathroom whenever it was necessary. But as Linder notes in his follow-up book, *Void Where Prohibited Revisited: The Trickle-Down Effect of OSHA's At-Will Bathroom-Break Regulation*, companies continued to block workers' right to use the bathroom at will.

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Some of the most egregious cases were in the meatpacking industry. In 1999, at the Excel hog-slaughter plant in Ottumwa, Iowa, OSHA investigations discovered that employees were forced to wait up to an hour and a half to use the bathroom. An OSHA inspector noted, “Having to wait this long when you need to use the bathroom must have been very painful for some of the people. Much less the loss of a primary human and animal right to use the bathroom as needed. This is harmful both physically and mentally.” Linder quoted workers’ testimony that the long wait to use the bathroom resulted in their urinating, defecating, or heavily menstruating in their clothing. Iowa’s state branch of OSHA fined the Excel-Ottumwa plant \$36,000, which was relatively severe considering that the highest statutory penalty at the time was \$70,000.

A 2005 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report likewise emphasized deteriorating conditions in the American meat industry. The report highlighted severe problems in three areas: workplace health and safety and workers’ compensation; freedom of association; and protection of immigrant workers’ rights. It noted that workers faced health and safety risks due to production line speeds, close-quarter cutting, heavy lifting, and dirty conditions amid blood, grease, feces, and ingesta. Injuries were systematically underreported. Company medical staff and policies stifled workers’ efforts to obtain compensation for injuries. Immigrant workers often struggled to reach company doctors, who could be hours away.

Particularly in the poultry industry, union-building efforts had little success. Employers’ threats to fire workers who attempted to join unions were especially intimidating for undocumented immigrants. Even immigrants with legal working status were vulnerable to employers’ abuse, given that they might work with undocumented family or friends. The 2005 HRW report stressed the link between immigrant status and health on the job. A March 2004 Associated Press investigative report revealed that Mexican workers across all industries in the United States were 80 percent more likely to die in the workplace than native-born workers, and nearly twice as likely as the rest of the immigrant population to die at work.

## THE JUNGLE RETURNS

In recent years, US meatpacking workers’ wages have continued to decline while industry safety

standards remain suspect. A May 2019 Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) report on wages indicated that slaughtering and meat workers’ average wages were just 74 percent of the average for all production workers.

The alarming rate of meatpacking workers’ carpal tunnel injuries in the 1980s helped make ergonomic guidelines a priority for OSHA in the 1990s. By the middle of that decade, OSHA reported that widespread adoption of Advanced Meat Recovery systems, in which machines separate meat from bone without the use of hand tools, had contributed to lowering reported cases of carpal tunnel syndrome by 38 percent. Despite the repeal of its new standards by the Bush administration in 2001, OSHA recommendations likely continued to have some positive effects on the incidence of carpal tunnel injuries. Nevertheless, a 2018 BLS report indicated that the rate of injuries and illnesses among animal slaughtering and processing workers was still higher than it was for manufacturing in general (4.3 compared with 3.4 per 100 full-time workers).

In 2020, meatpacking plants around the world emerged as ideal environments for the spread of COVID-19. The novel coronavirus thrives in lower temperatures and environments with very high or low humidity. Air quality is generally poor in meatpacking plants, which often have inadequate air filtration systems. And, as has been the case throughout the industry’s history, workplaces are crowded and social distancing generally absent.

Beginning in late March, companies across the United States started closing or severely reducing production at meatpacking plants. In response, President Donald Trump issued an April 28 executive order requiring meatpacking plants to continue production despite the health and safety threats posed to workers, invoking the Defense Production Act of 1950 as part of his justification. Citing meat’s importance in the American diet, Trump’s order authorized the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), OSHA, and the CDC to determine the best means of continuing meat production. The order gave the industry legal protection from worker liability claims, and prompted local and state health authorities to reopen plants. Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds, a Republican, conveyed a similar industry-friendly message in late April when she announced that workers who stayed home risked forfeiting eligibility for unemployment benefits.

Although Trump’s executive order attracted a lot of attention, its main effect was to designate

the agriculture secretary to encourage plants to follow federal guidelines and stay open. The USDA and the Food and Drug Administration announced a memorandum of understanding on May 19, reaffirming their commitment to protecting workers in meatpacking plants.

Since June, employment in the meat industry has rebounded along with other food industries, but many meatpacking workers do not believe that their employers have increased safety provisions. In complaints and litigation, workers have accused not only the companies but also OSHA of negligence. The agency came under fire soon after COVID-19 outbreaks became widespread in meatpacking plants. Workers' lawsuits demanded that OSHA develop binding national safety standards during the pandemic. In Pennsylvania, a lawsuit brought by workers at the Maid-Rite meatpacking plant in Dunmore argued that OSHA's response to the pandemic had been lax. The workers complained that Maid-Rite had not provided the necessary personal protective equipment, increased work spacing, or revised sick leave policies.

In early August, after reports that Tyson, JBS USA, and Smithfield had failed to issue protective gear or facilitate distancing, the US House of Representatives adopted an amendment proposed by Rep. Maxine Waters, a California Democrat, to prohibit the use of federal funds to implement Trump's executive order to keep plants open. On August 14, OSHA agreed to work with the North American Meat Institute, a trade association and industry lobbying group, to reduce workers' exposure to COVID-19, but emphasized that they would do so through nonbinding guidelines. OSHA claimed that its standards were sufficient and enforcement would be a priority.

Meanwhile, workers' organizations such as the UFCW continued to push for more protections. The League of United Latin American Citizens worked with Tyson to review workplace conditions in poultry plants in Arkansas. The UFCW sued the USDA for issuing a regulation increasing the limit for poultry processing line speeds without following procedures requiring a preliminary public comment period. Workers continued to file lawsuits against meatpackers throughout the country.

Although governments' reactions to COVID-19 outbreaks in other countries have been generally more supportive of workers' health and safety, one

constant is that the most severely affected meatpacking workers are immigrant newcomers. In Australia, after a surge of new cases in Victoria in early August, the state mandated that meatpacking plants could allow only two-thirds of their normal number of employees on site. This policy disproportionately affected immigrant workers, who make up nearly half the population of the city of Wyndham, just west of Melbourne, where a JBS plant is located.

In Germany, Eastern Europeans hired to work at the Tönnies meatpacking plant in Gütersloh, North Rhine–Westphalia, suffered disproportionate rates of COVID-19 infection due not only to cramped plant conditions but also to confined living conditions and transportation. Federal authorities took legal action against the company for violating standards on prevention and control of infectious diseases.

## CONSUMERS OVER WORKERS, AGAIN

As the world continues to struggle with the pandemic's effects, the link between meat production and global food insecurity has drawn more attention.

Given that the world's poorest people spend over 70 percent of their income on food, advocates see the pandemic and the meat industry crisis as an opportunity to explore new possibilities for food democracy. They aim to mobilize public support for safe, nutritious food that is justly produced, pushing back against the market forces that currently determine food policies. This would require more discussion and planning among governments and citizens about reforming food production and consumption. Such policy changes could also promote local food networks that connect small farmers and consumers in ways that bypass global food chains.

Some suggest that the pandemic's effects may spark a revolution in world dietary habits. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization projected in July that global meat consumption would decline by 3 percent in 2020, following a drop of 2 percent in 2019. The new projections would put meat consumption at its lowest levels since 2011.

While much attention has focused on the dangers of disease when people consume meat from wild animals, or bushmeat, some consumers may now be more concerned about how their meat is

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made. Public health scholars Sophie Attwood and Cother Hajat note that media coverage of COVID-19 outbreaks among meat industry employees “has helped to highlight some of the human aspects associated with systemized slaughter,” including the low pay, grueling work, and poor conditions.

Upton Sinclair would likely appreciate the irony that consumers may only indirectly or accidentally rally in support of worker safety as a sidelight to their concerns about food safety. His purpose in

writing *The Jungle* was to win support for socialism: “I aimed at the public’s heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach.” Instead of winning converts to labor organizing and political reform, Sinclair’s book solidified support for the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act. We could be in the midst of similar developments today. Sadly, while such changes may improve our diets, they will do little for the people who make our meat. ■