

A Cut Above?

By Kathleen Peratis

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Nauseating stories of what goes on in meatpacking plants — from those in Upton Sinclair’s “The Jungle” in 1906 to Eric Schlosser’s “Fast Food Nation” in 2002 — have caused us to pass up, if only temporarily, the occasional steak or hot dog. One year, I even forwent turkey on Thanksgiving.

But while our stomachs may have been turned by these stories, we have been ignoring the mangled lives and ever-worsening pay and benefits of the workers who kill and dismember the animals we eat. With little meat processing competition from abroad, we can’t blame this “race to the bottom” on globalization.

When workers in other countries are abused, we label those abuses human rights violations. We condemn the Chinese government for unsafe mines, the Cambodian government for labor violence, the Saudi government for not protecting household workers from sexual violence. But for workers here, we speak of little more than the right to organize. Once that is achieved, the rest is up to the unions.

The American labor movement is now waking up to the human rights of American workers. During International Human Rights Week earlier this month, the AFL-CIO produced an all-star line up of foreign leaders and Nobel peace prize winners to endorse its claims that human rights violations occur in American workplaces. The business community’s dismissive response was captured by Chamber of Commerce spokesperson Randel Johnson, who argued, “It seems pretty weak linking the U.S. to violations of rights in Burma. It seems to be a fairly desperate effort to shore up membership.”

Actually, it’s not.

Working conditions in Burma are not more horrifying than those confronted every day by thousands of meat and poultry workers right here in the United States.

Human Rights Watch’s report “Blood, Sweat and Fear: Worker’s Rights in U.S. Meat and Poultry Plants,” does not make for pretty reading. It graphically depicts workers who toil every day in “bloody, greasy surroundings,” and a government complicit in keeping the workforce desperate and docile. “Nearly *every worker* interviewed for [the] report,” it states, “bore physical signs of a serious injury suffered from working in a meat or poultry plant.”

Sinclair lamented that he had meant to hit the public’s heart while instead hitting its stomach with his tale of a Lithuanian immigrant meatpacker facing constant wage cuts, production line speedup, injuries and disease. Schlosser, too, was at least as concerned with workers as with the food supply in his documentation of gruesome deaths on the

clean-up shift in meat and poultry processing plants, including a beheading in a dehiding machine, a crushed skull in a pork-loin processing machine and limbs torn off in a skinning machine.

To be sure, work in an abattoir is bound to be hideous and dangerous. But it doesn't have to be this bad, nor should government be part of the problem.

One of the take-away images of “Blood, Sweat and Fear,” and there are many, is of the assembly lines — or rather, the “disassembly lines” of killing and butchering — moving ever faster and faster, a malign homage to “Modern Age.” One poultry worker recounts a line speed in 1995 of 32 birds a minute. By 2000, the speed had been increased so that workers had to dismember 40 birds a minute — or lose their job. Another worker said, “The line is so fast there is no time to sharpen the knife. The knife gets dull and you cut harder. That's when it really starts to hurt, and that's when you cut yourself.” According to a beef plant worker, “The chain goes so fast that it doesn't give the animals enough time to die.”

Line speed-up at meat and poultry plants is tacitly approved by the federal regulators, who do their regulating with only two considerations in mind, neither of which is worker safety. One of the regulatory goals the feds do care about is guarding against adulterated meat; the other is productivity — and both are undermined by ignoring worker safety.

Bad meat is more likely to go by on an assembly line that is moving too fast. USDA inspectors quoted in the report complain about an assembly line affliction called “line hypnosis,” in which workers lose awareness and concentration, the birds become just a yellow blur, and “some bad ones may slip through.”

Meatpacking used to be a good job and the unions representing meatpackers used to be strong and progressive. Not any more. Only a fraction of the industry is organized, a large proportion of the workers are immigrants too fearful to complain, and the legal protections purportedly in place — even such basic rights as workers' comp for injuries — are manipulated or simply ignored.

A fire occurred in 1991 at the Imperial Poultry plant in Hamlet, N.C., in which 25 immigrant workers died, trapped behind doors that were locked because their employer suspected them of stealing chicken parts. If that sounds familiar, perhaps it's because in 1911 the doors were locked at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, also to prevent “theft.”

No, North Carolina is not Burma — but conditions are not nearly as different as we imagine or might wish. Is it not time — at long last — to demand that our government practice what it so smugly preaches, and pay attention to the human rights of workers in these terrible and dangerous jobs.

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