

From **Food is Power** [http://www.foodispower.org/slaughterhouse\\_workers.htm](http://www.foodispower.org/slaughterhouse_workers.htm)

## **Slaughterhouse Workers**

Slaughtering animals and processing their flesh is an inherently dangerous industry where

Employees are very aware of the dangerous nature of their work. When you combine sharp tools and automated machinery in a high-paced, crowded environment, injuries are inevitable.

## Health and Safety Hazards

A variety of U.S. and international labor laws are designed to guarantee workers a safe and healthy work environment free from known hazards. However, slaughterhouse and "meat"-processing workers labor each day in conditions with predictable risks despite the fact that employers are aware of safer alternatives. Consequently, many of the injuries and deaths that workers suffer are preventable.

### Line Speed

The single largest factor contributing to worker injuries is the speed at which the animals are killed and processed. In an industry where profit margins are slim and volume is everything, workers are endlessly pressured to kill more animals in less time. Rather than regulate line speeds for the interest of worker safety, line speed is limited only by federal sanitation laws.<sup>[4]</sup>

Most facilities operate nearly 24 hours a day 7 days a week - killing and processing hundreds or thousands of animals each hour. As one worker

stated: *The line is so fast there is no time to sharpen the knife. The knife gets dull and you have to cut harder. That's when it really starts to hurt, and that's when you cut yourself.*<sup>[5]</sup>

There are other types of manufacturing industries that take great pride in ensuring safe working conditions and even empower workers to shut down machinery when they feel that conditions are potentially unsafe. Slaughterhouse and "meat"-processing workers are made to feel the opposite - even when they know that conditions are extremely unsafe, they work on in fear of being reprimanded by supervisors.

### Long Hours & Repetitive Stress

The combination of long hours and repetitive motion directly leads to increased risk of injury. In large facilities, it is not uncommon for a line worker to make up to 40,000 repetitive cuts in a single shift.<sup>[6]</sup> The workers suffer chronic pains in their hands, wrists, arms, shoulders and back.<sup>[4]</sup> Repetitive stress injuries are unavoidable under the frantic pace that most facilities choose to operate.

Working an 8-hour shift in this type of environment is physically and mentally exhausting. The situation gets far more dangerous when workers are required to work mandatory overtime. According to one employee: *"The last hour of a regular shift is hard. You're tired and it's hard to*





Most workers are in a continuous state of pain due to the long hours and repetitive nature of their work. They feel disrespected and underappreciated as their supervisors are quick to remind them they can be easily replaced. In the case of undocumented workers, the constant threat of deportation creates added stress and anxiety.

The repetitive stress injuries that workers endure also have a significant influence on their lives outside of work. Living with chronic aches and pains affects every aspect of a person's life.

Some of the activities that would normally bring great joy to a person, such as playing with their children, are inhibited by injuries suffered in the workplace.

In addition to the chronic physical pains that workers experience, psychologists are becoming increasingly interested in exploring the psychological effects of working in a slaughterhouse.<sup>[9]</sup> Workers who are responsible for killing animals routinely observe animals being cut and dismembered while still conscious, as well as being skinned and boiled alive. Hour after hour, day after day the workers interact with countless animals in various states of fear and pain.

A former kill floor manager gave the following account: "*The worst thing, worse than the*

identifying line speed as the main contributor to unsafe conditions. Multiple workers also expressed concerns that high line speeds directly compromise food quality and can lead to contamination. The workers were hesitant to communicate these concerns to supervisors out of fear of demotion or termination.

Every day, "meat"-

[8] "Blood, Sweat and Fear: Workers' Rights in U.S. Meat and Poultry Plants." A Human Rights Watch report. 2004. Interview in Omaha, Nebraska, July 15, 2003.  
<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2005/usa0105/> (6/2/10)

[9] Dillard, Jennifer. "A Slaughterhouse Nightmare: Psychological Harm Suffered by Slaughterhouse Employees and the Possibility of Redress through Legal Reform." Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law & Policy, Forthcoming.  
[http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1016401](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1016401) (7/5/10)

[10] "SEC. 5. Duties." U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) - Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)  
[http://www.osha.gov/pls/oshaweb/owadisp.show\\_document?p\\_id=3359&p\\_table=OSHACT](http://www.osha.gov/pls/oshaweb/owadisp.show_document?p_id=3359&p_table=OSHACT)  
(6/20/10)



### Our Blog, *Appetite for Justice*

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we work on ô the treatment of animals, workers, and the environment, as well as environmental justice issues ô but also includes information about our current efforts and how people can get involved. [READ MORE...](#)

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