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Recommended Citation

Available at: http://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/sdlp/vol18/iss1/10
HOW FAST IS TOO FAST? OSHA’S REGULATION OF THE MEAT INDUSTRY’S LINE SPEED AND THE PRICE PAID BY HUMANS AND ANIMALS

By Israel Cook*

In 2016, the United States employed more than 491,000 workers in the meat industry, thereby feeding more than 318 million Americans, and processing over 9 billion animals per year. The growth of the meat industry has placed pressure on slaughterhouses to increase the pace of their line speeds in order to produce more meat and satisfy consumer demand. Due to the faster pace of production, workers are suffering high rates of injury, and animals are being mistreated while still alive. The fast pace of line speeds in slaughterhouses adversely affects worker safety and animal welfare; therefore, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) should regulate line speed in meatpacking plants.

Dangerously fast slaughter line speeds are the leading cause of worker injuries due to the pressure to kill more animals in less time. It is estimated that every year, almost 25% of all meatpacking employees are injured or ill, and the high speed of production lines has increased the industry’s already abundant amount of injuries. The pace of the line affects the employee’s ability to perform tasks safely, making the speed of production an important factor in the health and safety of workers. The physical efforts required for sawing, cutting, slicing, lifting thousands of animals each day is the major source of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), which is endemic in the meat and poultry industry. Workers in the meatpacking industry “have the highest rate of MSDs, seven times the average incidence rate in manufacturing,” yet the government is not required to track the growing number of MSDs diagnosed in slaughterhouses. The meat industry claims that the rise of injuries related to fast-moving line speeds is untrue, stating that workers’ injuries have declined over the years. However, inspectors, often employed by the meat industry have little incentives to investigate injuries because the injuries could halt the line and affect production margins. OSHA argues that it does not have authority over production speeds and that MSDs cannot solely be attributed to the fast-moving line speeds.

Not only does the line speed affect the safety of the meat industry employees, it significantly contributes to discrimination of individual employees and violates workers’ rights. The majority of laborers in the meatpacking industry are at-will employees and are less likely to report a workplace hazard out of fear of losing their jobs. A number of laborers in the meatpacking industry are undocumented or do not speak English, making them more vulnerable and fearful of reporting workplace hazards. Despite the growth of meat production, slaughterhouse workers’ wages have been rapidly declining. The salary of meatpacking employees barely keeps workers above the poverty line, thus affecting their access to health services as they cannot afford proper transportation to and from doctors, much less healthcare. Furthermore, many slaughterhouses operate twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week, requiring employees to work grueling hours—often without approved time off. Additionally, laborers are not allowed unionize, thus facing barriers to exercise their freedom of association.

Consumption of animal products results in the unnecessary suffering and death of billions of animals. Despite having some regulation, like the Humane Slaughter Act, animals are still subjected to inhumane acts of cruelty during processing. While some states have anti-cruelty statutes that work to prevent this conduct, they focus on the individual violations rather than the overall industry violations. The Washington Post reports that “nearly 1 million chickens and turkeys are unintentionally boiled alive each year in U.S. slaughterhouses” due to the increasing pace of product lines.

Currently, line speed is regulated by the USDA based on Food Safety standards, and it is only limited by federal sanitation laws. That is, the only time the speed of the line is slowed down is when a USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) inspector halts the line because she or he identifies an animal carcass that appears contaminated (e.g., fecally, bruised, and hemorrhaged). Otherwise, line speed can increase without any concern for a worker’s safety. Under the Poultry Products Inspection Act (PPIA) and the Federal Meat Inspection Act (FMIA), the regulation of line speed by the USDA for sanitation concerns does not preclude OSHA from regulating line speed for worker health and safety concerns. Though previous attempts by OSHA to regulate line speeds have been blocked by Congress, OSHA must regulate line speed to not only ensure a safe and healthy working condition for workers but to also curb animal cruelty in the meatpacking industry.

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ENDNOTES: HOW FAST IS TOO FAST? OSHA’S REGULATION OF THE MEAT INDUSTRY’S LINE SPEED AND THE PRICE PAID BY HUMANS AND ANIMALS

continued from page 39

5 See id. at 393.
8 See Dillard, supra note 4, at 393.
10 Id.
14 See id.
15 Slaughterhouse Workers, supra note 7.
16 Lowe, supra note 13.
18 Dillard, supra note 4, at 2.
19 See id.
20 Slaughterhouse Workers, supra note 7.
21 See id.
23 See Dillard, supra note 4, at 395.
24 See id.
26 Workplace Safety & Health, supra note 9, at 32.
27 Slaughterhouse Workers, supra note 7.
28 See id.
29 See id.
30 Workplace Safety & Health, supra note 9, at 32.