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**The Shame of Meatpacking**

Karen Olsson | August 29, 2002

The strike began, Maria Martinez recalls, because a worker on the loin line wasn't keeping up with the pace of production. When a supervisor pulled him into the office, some thirty workers, Martinez among them, dropped their knives and followed him there. "The superintendent said, 'You've got sixty seconds to get back to work, or everyone's fired,'" says Martinez. "We didn't move, and then he said, 'OK, you guys are all fired.' So we went outside, and the next thing we knew there were hundreds of people outside." This was in June 1999, at an IBP meatpacking plant near Pasco, Washington. Fed up with plant conditions and stalled contract negotiations, close to 800 workers, nearly all of them immigrants, rallied alongside the plant access road for five weeks.

They returned to work discouraged. Though the new contract, narrowly approved, raised starting pay from $7 to $8.50, it eliminated the old $1.50-an-hour pension and did not include a provision allowing workers to stop the chain for sanitary reasons, which workers had wanted. But for Martinez, now principal officer of Teamsters Local 556 in Walla Walla, Washington, the strike was a step forward. "We lost, but we also gained respect, we gained dignity, we gained a lot of strength," Martinez says. On the day they returned to work, she says, "we parked our cars on the picket line, and we all walked in together, chanting, 'The union is back!'"

In fact, IBP workers had made significant gains before the strike, organizing themselves and voting to change the local's bylaws so they could elect their own shop stewards. The following summer, Martinez and fellow strike leader Melquiadez Pereya were elected to lead the local, replacing the older Anglo officers who workers say failed to maintain a strong union presence in the plant. And three years later, the union is back more than ever: The revitalized Local 556 has made a dramatic impact on the shop floor, defending the interests of individual workers while pushing for a safer, more sanitary workplace.

The shouts of protest aren't just coming from Washington. Last September in Amarillo, Texas, hundreds of workers walked out of another IBP plant to protest low wages and chronic staff shortages that had made their already dangerous jobs all the more stressful and hazardous. At an Excel meatpacking plant in Ft. Morgan, Colorado, more than 400 workers conducted another wildcat strike last February. And in Omaha, Nebraska, an Industrial Areas Foundation-affiliated community group called Omaha Together One Community (OTOC) and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) have teamed up to organize workers in a dozen area packing plants. According to IAF organizer Tom Holler, when OTOC began holding meetings in South Omaha in 1993, "It was clear from day one that the major issue in the community was the conditions in these plants."

As readers of Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (and of past reports in this and other publications) are well aware, America's 150,000 meatpacking workers perform the most dangerous job in the country, many of them making knife cuts every few seconds. In 2000 the official illness and injury rate for meatpacking workers was 25 percent. Given the chronic underreporting of injuries in the industry, particularly when it comes to cumulative stress disorders, the actual injury rate is probably much higher. In Walla Walla, the union examined plant injury logs and found that 781 injuries had been recorded in 1999 and 2000, while in a recent union-sponsored survey of just under 500 workers, two-thirds said they had suffered a work-related health problem in the past twelve months.

The reasons for this are no secret. Four giant competitors--IBP, ConAgra, Excel (owned by Cargill) and Farmland National Beef--dominate the beef industry, together controlling over 85 percent of the US market. Because profit margins are much slimmer than in other manufacturing sectors, the companies are especially intent on keeping labor costs as low as possible and volume as high as possible--which translates into hiring cheap labor, discouraging unions and maintaining intolerably high chain speeds, even if those things contribute to the industry's astronomical turnover rates. Because so many meatpacking workers are recent, non-English-speaking immigrants, some of them in the country illegally, they are less likely to complain about unsafe conditions. Meanwhile, inspections by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration dropped to an all-time low by the late 1990s. No one expects that trend to be reversed under President Bush, who last year proposed cuts in OSHA's budget and, in a move urged by the meat industry and other business groups, repealed workplace ergonomics standards that had been under development for ten years.

Trying to take on a giant meatpacker is not an easy task; in Amarillo more than 500 workers who walked out lost their jobs. (Some have since been hired back.) And it's highly unlikely that a few revitalized union locals could, on their own, force the powerful packers to slow down the breakneck pace of production--the primary cause of the industry's stunningly high injury rates. But after years of industry unionbusting and co-optation, the recent worker actions cut promisingly against the grain.

"There are things that explain these explosions," says David Levin, a Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) organizer, who has met with meatpacking workers in Pasco and Ft. Morgan. "One is just the incredible speedup and pressure in the workplace, and the safety hazards that come with that. Then there is the really abusive and disrespectful treatment of workers. You're made to work faster than you can safely, and then treated disrespectfully in this often racist way by management. When people are facing these problems as individuals, they seem insurmountable, but in combination it can be an explosive concoction."

Men and women from Mexico and Central America have long been making the trek north to Washington's Columbia River valley, a lush farming region where asparagus fields, orchards and vineyards provide seasonal work to immigrant laborers. A job at IBP represents a step up, as it is one of the few local year-round jobs available to a non-English speaker. Ninety percent of the plant's workers are immigrants: Most are from Latin America, while a significant minority are refugees from Laos, Vietnam and Bosnia.

Martinez, on the other hand, was born and raised in California, and applied to work at IBP after moving to Pasco in 1988. Compared with her previous jobs, "it was different," she says. "It's hard, hard work. You go home and you are always in pain. After three weeks, I was about to quit--I couldn't handle the work." It wasn't as if Martinez was unaccustomed to physical labor: She grew up in Fresno, the eleventh of twenty-two children of farmworker parents. A tomboy, she played football and boxed with her brothers, and beginning when she was 14, she would pick plums and table grapes from April to November. As a result she never finished school, and went on to a series of factory jobs. Today, at 45, she is sturdy-framed and energetic, and as she recalls her struggles with the company she slips easily from resoluteness to laughter, pausing to relish a particular moment--say, the day when the processing workers rattled the supervisors by loudly clanging their meat hooks against the conveyor belts all at once--and to note that "It was *neat*," or "It was *so neat*."

But meatpacking is indeed different, largely thanks to IBP. It was IBP that redesigned the modern meatpacking industry in the 1960s, reorganizing production to eliminate skilled labor, locating the plants in rural areas where unions were not a threat, slashing wages and speeding up the chain. "IBP set the trend and other companies have followed," says University of Kansas anthropologist Donald Stull, who has studied the industry for fifteen years. "They are all locked in this dance together; they all have to do the same kind of thing; and there really isn't any disincentive to keep doing them from the government." (Though to the extent that there are disincentives, IBP has been at the receiving end of them: The same year Martinez started in Pasco, OSHA proposed a $3.1 million fine against the company for safety violations in its Dakota City, Nebraska, plant--the second-largest penalty in the agency's history, though it was later reduced--and Congressman Tom Lantos lambasted the company as "clearly one of the most irresponsible and reckless corporations in America in terms of workers' health and safety.")

Martinez stuck to her job, despite the pain and despite the fact that the company had frozen wages at around $7 an hour years earlier, substituting small quarterly bonuses for raises. Employees were nevertheless made to work harder and harder. According to Ramon Moreno, who worked for twenty-one years in slaughter, beginning in 1979, the chain speed more than doubled over those two decades. The Pasco plant was cited repeatedly by state investigators for safety violations. Although workers were members of Teamsters Local 556, it was not a strong presence in the plant. "We didn't know anything about the union," recalls Maria Chavez, another longtime IBP worker.

Martinez's first foray into union activism was a disappointment: During contract negotiations in 1992, she joined a group of Pasco workers in an ultimately unsuccessful push for better pay and working conditions. "I swore I would never get involved with a union again," says Martinez. But in 1997, a different set of workers wrote a letter to the Teamsters international to complain about the local, and a Teamsters investigator, Joe Fahey, came to Pasco and met with a large group of workers. "People were crying, talking about being covered in diarrhea the entire shift because the supervisor wouldn't let them go to the bathroom," says Fahey, now president of Teamsters Local 912 in California and co-chair of TDU.

"That was the day we got our voices back," Pereya would say later. With help from TDU, Martinez, Pereya and other workers began organizing the plant, setting up a communication network inside and voting to change the local's bylaws. "We did huge actions inside," says Martinez, who was elected chief steward after the bylaws change. "We used to walk into the manager's office, during break, hundreds of us, with a petition over supervisor harassment. We used to pack that office like sardines." After the bruising contract campaign and strike, the Teamsters international put the local under trusteeship, removing Martinez from the steward's position. But she went to court and won her position back and subsequently was elected to head the local.

Since then, the union has increased the number of shop stewards and initiated a health and safety campaign; last year, workers won a $3.1 million judgment for unpaid time putting on and taking off equipment; and this year they filed a second such lawsuit. (The company appealed the first decision and issued a memo advising that workers were no longer required to remove their kill-floor frocks or other equipment in the cafeteria.) Workers went public with a videotape showing cattle being slaughtered alive, animal-rights groups were outraged and the state launched an investigation.

The union's biggest victory, says Maria Chavez, has been changing the climate inside the IBP plant. "We were fearful before this woman came," she says, referring to Martinez. "There was fear that if we said anything they would fire us. Now it's evident that the people aren't afraid."

The gaining of power by Pasco's workers, heartening as it may be, still pales in comparison with the concentration of power within the industry. Last year Tyson Foods purchased IBP, making Tyson/IBP the Death Star of the meat business: It controls 27 percent of the US beef market, 23 percent of the chicken market and 19 percent of the pork market, with an annual revenue of roughly $24 billion a year. "It's too early to tell" what effect the merger might have on IBP's 32,500 production and maintenance workers, says the University of Kansas's Stull, but given that Tyson has a checkered labor record of its own, "I don't think things will get better. If anything, they'll get worse."

Certainly, it didn't help the workers who lost their jobs in Amarillo. The Amarillo IBP plant is significantly larger than the Pasco plant, employing 3,000 production and maintenance workers, and accordingly the chain runs even faster. Workers say the plant had been chronically understaffed for months before the strike. Recalls José Vazquez, who worked at IBP for eight years, up until the walkout, "When I started working there, there were fifteen chuck-boners on each line, and 380 chain speed was considered fast; you had to have sixteen or seventeen for that. Before we walked out, they were doing 400 an hour, with thirteen or fourteen chuck-boners." Last September, a group of workers approached management, threatening to quit if the staffing problem was not addressed, and asking that the company raise wages to the level of two other area meatpacking plants in order to better retain workers. When those discussions failed, the fifty or so workers involved were asked to leave the building, and hundreds of others followed them outside. IBP warned them to return to work or be fired and called the walkout "an unsanctioned protest over wages." The company fired them all several days later. Because the strike did not occur during contract negotiations, Teamsters Local 577 declined to sanction the walkout; local president Rusty Stepp told reporters there was nothing he could do for the wildcatting workers.

For several weeks, many of the fired workers installed themselves across the road from the plant like so many Texas bedouins, in a long string of tents, tarps, lawn chairs and pickup trucks. Yet their effort to put public pressure on the company did not meet with significant community support. "IBP just launched its public relations juggernaut and basically spun the walkout as a dispute over wages," says Jim Wood, one of a handful of Amarillo attorneys who tried to help the workers. "Really the issue was worker safety, and people who studied the issue saw that. Eventually the Catholic Church of Amarillo came out strongly in support of the workers, but by then people's minds were made up." Because Amarillo is predominantly Anglo, and most of the protesters were either Mexican-American or Asian-American, adds Wood, "there wasn't a lot of contact between them and the Anglo community."

Last October I spoke with workers outside the plant; it was clear that they were angry, they wanted their jobs back and they wanted their working conditions to improve. As had been the case in Pasco, Amarillo IBP workers were represented by a Teamsters local that many viewed as ineffective. But unlike in the Pasco strike, the Amarillo walkout had not been preceded by a sustained organizing effort inside the plant, and the five workers who formed an ersatz strike committee were not experienced leaders. Where Martinez and Pereya had a worker communication network organized by production line, the Amarillo workers had a bullhorn and a Peavey amplifier on the back of a pickup truck.

Representatives from a Justice Department community relations office in Dallas, the League of United Latin American Citizens and the union met with company officials to negotiate a back-to-work agreement, but with no workers or strong worker advocates present, the resulting agreement was weak, stipulating that the company would rehire fired workers on a "case-by-case basis," and that rehired workers would not be entitled to their old shifts or job-bidding seniority. "In my opinion they didn't negotiate anything, they just agreed to what the company gave them," says Vazquez.

Last April I returned to Amarillo and visited the offices of Medina y Medina translating, a small storefront in a down-market shopping plaza, and headquarters of Pioneros Para La Justicia, a group of current and former IBP workers, formed last December. There, Pioneros collective member Sonia Campos has been filing unemployment appeals and organizing meetings. She also fields questions from former workers who call or stop by, like Alex Telles, who showed up while I was there. Telles lost his job as a skinner because of the walkout, after twenty-two years with IBP. Since then, he says, he's been working temp jobs for Manpower, Inc. "It's been lousy," Telles says. "I get maybe three days of work a week from them. I've got applications all over town: warehouses, truck stops. I went to get food stamps and they wouldn't help me." With a wife who works in a nursing home and two teenage sons, says Telles, "we're just barely getting by."

At an evening meeting of thirty former and current IBP workers at St. Laurence Catholic Church, the stories were similar: People who'd been laid off were struggling to pay bills and applying for public assistance. Those who had been called back to work said that the company had hired more people, but that many of the new workers were inexperienced.

The Amarillo workers' prospects for repeating the successes of the Pasco local are less than rosy. Several years ago, Amarillo attorney Jeff Blackburn helped convene a meeting between a group of IBP workers and TDU's Joe Fahey, but it failed to spark the kind of internal organizing seen in Pasco. "There's been a continuously self-defeating cycle of spontaneous anger that gets expressed," says Blackburn. "Leaders that really aren't leaders get thrown into it, and then everybody gets demoralized." For her part, Campos plans to circulate a worker petition to decertify the Teamsters and designate Pioneros Para La Justicia as their bargaining representative. It's not hard to understand her disenchantment with the Teamsters--Local 577 president Stepp, who earns $103,000 a year, seems to have little contact with the 2,000 members who work at IBP. But it is difficult to imagine Campos's pioneers waging a successful battle against IBP with no institutional support at all.

Stepp did not return phone calls for this story. The International Brotherhood of Teamsters, which (unlike TDU) has not expressed support for wildcatting workers in Ft. Morgan and Amarillo, provided a brief statement: "There were problems that led to a wildcat strike with IBP at Local 577. The union has responded to these problems and continues to proactively address them." Last spring, representatives from the Teamsters international flew to Amarillo to meet with current and laid-off IBP workers. "They made promises," says Campos, "but after they left, they didn't return our phone calls."

While the Teamsters represent only a handful of the packing plants nationwide, the UFCW maintains by far the largest union presence in meatpacking--representing roughly 60 percent of slaughterhouse workers, according to UFCW spokesman Greg Denier. Individual locals vary, but in general the history of meatpacking unions during the second half of the twentieth century is a story of sharp decline. Once the old unionized firms gave way to IBP, says labor historian Roger Horowitz, the unions found themselves unable to organize the new, nonunion packers, and by the early 1980s concessionary bargaining was the norm: "The UFCW would persuade the company to sign a closed-shop agreement and get things like health insurance," but wages remained low, while chain speeds got higher and higher.

If events in Omaha and Pasco are any indication, that trend doesn't have to continue. But unions can't do it alone, says Martinez. "The humane-slaughter people and the food-safety people should work together; they'd have a lot of power," she says. "In the meat industry, both issues have to do with the chain. The chain goes so fast that it doesn't give the animals enough time to die. People don't have enough time to wash their knife if it falls on the floor." And tens of thousands of workers are injured every year. "I've been writing about it for fifteen years; a lot of people in the media have said the things I've said, and things haven't changed," says Stull.

Still, workers and industry critics hope that more consumers will come to appreciate the link between food safety and a safer workplace. The union campaigns in Pasco and the organizing drive in Omaha owe much of their success to their efforts to involve the community--particularly churches and local colleges--in their efforts. Home Justice Watch, a Texas-based group that works on worker safety, human rights and animal rights violations in slaughterhouses, has launched the Eat Rights campaign to focus consumer attention on these issues. "The same things that contribute to the contamination of the meat are what make it more likely that people are going to get hurt," says Eric Schlosser. "The only reason it's been allowed to continue is that people don't know. Even if you have no compassion for the poor and the illegal in this country, if you eat meat, or the people you love eat meat, you should care."

The way to change the industry is by "people being informed and spreading the word to the public," says Martinez. "The worst fear of IBP is workers being united. Now we're here, and they know I'm not in bed with them. You have to have them by their tail. I'm always pulling their tail."

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