Making Meat in the Time of COVID-19

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Donald D. Stull

The first case of novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in the United States was identified on January 20, 2020. The first death was reported on February 29. Agricultural futures began falling in late February, when the stock market started to react to the emerging pandemic. Prices paid to U.S. cattle producers dropped like a stone, shoppers emptied grocery meat counters as fears of COVID-19 escalated and retail meat prices soared. Even so, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported that cold storage supplies of meat and poultry were higher than at the same time in 2019, and there should be ample supplies for the rest of the year. But then, meat and poultry processing workers started getting sick.

The last week of March saw the first packinghouse workers, one at a chicken plant in Mississippi and another at a pork plant in South Dakota, test positive for the virus. And COVID-19 killed a federal meat inspector in New York City. COVID "hotspots" soon erupted in meat and poultry plants from Washington and Wisconsin to Colorado and Pennsylvania, from Texas and Georgia to Alberta and Ontario. On successive days in mid-April, meatpacking giant JBS shuttered its beef plant in Greeley, Colorado, as cases at its plant and in the surrounding county mushroomed, and Smithfield closed its Sioux Falls, South Dakota, pork plant, where the second infected meatpacking worker had been reported. In the ensuing two weeks, Sioux Falls had become the nation's leading hotspot, accounting for more than half of South Dakota's entire COVID caseload. National news outlets began questioning the security of America's meat supply.

On April 28, NBC News reported that at least 5,000 meat and poultry workers were infected and 20 had died. The same day, John Tyson, chairman of the board of Tyson Foods, took out full-page ads in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* to say that the coronavirus pandemic was breaking the food supply chain, and Tyson products would be in short supply until its plants once again were running normally. The next day, President Trump invoked the Defense Production Act of 1950 in an executive order classifying meat and poultry plants as critical infrastructure. The order directed the USDA to "ensure America's meat and poultry processors continue operations uninterrupted to the maximum extent possible" and absolved companies of liability for COVID infections or deaths among their workers. Smithfield and the National Pork Producers Council applauded the order. The United Food and Commercial Workers International Union and the National Farmers Union countered that efforts to ensure an adequate supply of meat should not be at the expense of workers' health and safety.

I followed the escalating reports of how COVID-19 was wreaking havoc on the meat supply with particular interest and growing concern over what the president's executive order might mean for meat and poultry workers and the communities where they live and work.

> *There are learned people who can tell you out of the statistics that beef-boners make forty cents an hour, but, perhaps, these people have never looked into a beef-boner's hands.*
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> Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*

My introduction to the meat and poultry industry began in 1987, when I directed a team of social scientists in a study of life and work in Garden City, Kansas, as part of the Ford Foundation's national research project on changing relations between new immigrants and established residents. Migrants from Latin America and refugees from Southeast Asia thronged to Garden City to work in its two massive beef plants. Our Garden City fieldwork wound down in 1990, but my research on meatpacking and what it does to communities and workers had only just begun.

Following on our work in Garden City, my research partner Michael Broadway and I conducted in-depth research in Lexington, Nebraska; Guymon, Oklahoma; Webster County, Kentucky; and Brooks, Alberta, Canada. In these places, and others where we were asked to provide technical assistance, we worked with local elected officials, law enforcement, educators, health care providers, clergy and concerned citizens as they grappled with the massive changes and daunting challenges beef, pork, and poultry processing plants bring to the towns where our meat is made.

My research has taken me not only into packinghouse towns, but also onto packinghouse floors. In 1994, I was hired by a major meatpacking company to study labor relations in one of its plants and recommend areas for improvement. For eight months, anthropologist Ken Erickson, industrial psychologist Miguel Giner and I carried out ethnographic research in this plant. It began with a tour of the plant one Saturday in February. By August we could give tours ourselves, and I did on one occasion. Our workdays began at 7:00AM with the "morning management meeting" and usually did not end until well after midnight when the second shift got off work.

We socialized with and interviewed managers and union representatives, line supervisors and line workers, men and women, English and non-English speakers, Anglos and African Americans, Asians and Latinx. Interviews were problem focused and questions were open-ended. We took notes during or immediately after our conversations or interviews. In a few cases we were able to record and later transcribe interviews. Respondents were selected by purposive or structural sampling, and we interviewed knowledgeable persons and those who held key positions, such as plant and floor managers, trainers, union business manager and stewards, current employees and those who had recently quit or been fired. We were careful to replicate ethnic, cultural and gender diversity in the plant, as well as different departments and shifts. Our research contract guaranteed confidentiality to everyone we spoke with, and that the company would not have access to any of our data. In return, we promised not to identify the plant in any of our publications without the company's permission.

Although I never again had such unfettered access to the inner workings of a meat plant, I have continued to study the industry. In 1998, I spent six months studying poultry growers and processing workers in and around Webster County, Kentucky, where I was born and am half owner of a family grain farm. I returned in 2005 for six months to update my research. Between these two extended field seasons, and since, I have regularly returned to Webster County to visit friends and relatives and to update my research. Since retiring from the University Kansas in 2015, I divide my time between Kansas and Kentucky.

For three decades and more, the study of the meat and poultry industry has consumed my professional life. First by examining its impacts on packinghouse towns, moving on to what it does to the workers who "pull their count" on its disassembly lines, and ending up where the making of meat begins, with the farmers and ranchers who raise the animals. I have gone from a researcher, enraptured by a fascinating subject that had been largely ignored by scholars, journalists and the general public, to someone whose (part-time) home and family farm are quite

literally "in the belly of the beast"—a few miles down the road from a Tyson chicken plant that is, as I write these words, temporarily closed because of a COVID-9 outbreak among its employees. My work has taken me to towns and hamlets, farms and ranches from Oklahoma to Alberta and from Maryland to Manitoba. I have listened to packinghouse workers describe their work over beers and stood alongside them as they wielded knives and saws on killfloors and processing lines. I have listened to them describe dismal working conditions and disabling injuries in courtrooms and in living rooms.

> *I aimed at the public's heart and by accident I hit it in the stomach.*
> Upton Sinclair, *The Autobiography of Upton Sinclair*, 1962

I share Sinclair's lament. As someone who has written and publically spoken at length about the human costs of our meat, I have been consistently disappointed (though not surprised) by the public's lack of concern with the working conditions, wages, health and safety of meat and poultry line workers. The first question I am usually asked after I talk about my research is: "Do you still eat meat?" (I do.)

The public has been far more concerned about the welfare of farmed animals than of those who turn them into meat for our tables. And like readers of *The Jungle* a century ago, they are much more worried about food safety than worker safety. Or they were, until outbreaks of COVID-19 in meat and poultry plants threatened to decimate their local grocery's meat counter; till Costco and Kroeger's began limiting how much meat they could buy, and Wendy's removed hamburgers from menus in some of its outlets.

I am heartened that meatpacking companies are now receiving media scrutiny; that the health and welfare of those who toil on their lines have become the object of public concern. Much has been made of how meat and poultry plants lend themselves to coronavirus outbreaks because they employ thousands of line workers, who often must stand shoulder to shoulder to do their jobs. Calls for the well-being of workers and the reopening of shuttered plants have focused on the need for enhanced testing, and for companies to provide adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) and ensure "social distancing." They should.

But what journalists and the general public often fail to realize is that unless the nature of line work in meat and poultry plants changes significantly, coronavirus will continue to be a serious problem for workers, their families and the communities where they live. And all indications are that meat and poultry companies intend to go back to business as usual as soon as they can.

> *Boxes weighing 40 pounds or more come down the line every 10 seconds or so, sometimes even faster. You can't stop just because they're heavy and you're tired. It gets you in great shape and makes an old man of you real quick—both at the same time.*
> Line supervisor, beef plant, 1989

Video snippets of workers sawing hog hindquarters or sorting chicken parts on processing lines, which accompany stories of plant closings and meat shortages on the nightly news, can never convey the sights, sounds and smells that assault the senses in the massive factories that turn animal to edible (to borrow Noelie Vialles's apt phrasing). In beef plants, two or three thousand

men and women—or more--toil on "disassembly" lines killing, bleeding, skinning, gutting, sawing, boning, cutting, trimming, shrink-wrapping, boxing and loading hundreds of cattle an hour, five or six days a week.

Today's beef plants are a far cry from those described in *The Jungle*. But even with all the impressive innovations—ergonomics, robotics, computerization, laser technology—the knife, the meat hook and the sharpening steel are still the basic tools of the trade. Hogs and chickens are smaller and more uniform than cattle, thanks to company control of their genetics, so pork and poultry plants rely on fewer workers. Their lines run much faster, too: a thousand hogs an hour; 175 chickens a minute—or more. No matter the animal they process, modern meat and poultry plants, like those of old, are rigidly organized, labor-intensive factories where "hitting the numbers" matters more than product quality—or safety.

There are really three workforces in meat and poultry plants. Managers, technicians, sales workers, buyers and other professionals are usually native-born, middle-aged men. Most are Anglo Americans whose knowledge of other languages and cultures is based on their experience at work. White women dominate the office and clerical staff. In contrast to managers, professionals and office staff, hourly production workers, who make up about 90 percent of the employees in meat and poultry plants, are predominately people of color, most of whom are immigrants and refugees. In the 1980s they came largely from Mexico and Vietnam. Today, Mexicans, Salvadorans and Guatemalans stand elbow to elbow with Somalis, Sudanese, Burmese, Ethiopians and Marshall Islanders.

"Pulling your count" on a meat or poultry line does not require a high school diploma, previous work experience or the ability to speak English. This helps explain why today's meat and poultry industry plants rely heavily on immigrants and refugees. The packers see their polycultural and polyglot workforce as affording them a distinct advantage, so long as they can manage it. They have fewer job options, and industry executives and plant managers believe they work harder than native-born Americans, are less likely to know their rights or organize. In short, they are more vulnerable.

Meat and poultry processing's labor landscape is changing, however. The Trump administration has stepped up deportations and severely reduced the numbers of immigrants and refugees admitted to the United States. Companies are adapting with greater automation on plant floors, but that can reduce labor needs only so far. At the same time demand for meat and poultry is rising, necessitating increased production—and more workers.

Work on the line is tedious, monotonous and risky—it wears workers down, and sooner or later most get fired, get hurt or quit. Take Marcial, an immigrant who helped me map the kill floor of the plant where he worked. He gave his two weeks' notice and worked his last day at the plant eight years and one day after he started. When he began working on the killfloor, he was Number 500 on the seniority list. When he quit he was Number 75. The clerk who administered his exit interview asked why he was quitting: "The lines go too fast, the supervisors are too mean, they push their workers too hard and I don't like anything about working there." Befuddled by his answer, she looked blankly at him as he laughed. She left the space on the form for why he quit empty.

Meatpacking line workers are required to wear hardhats, safety glasses, earplugs, steel-toed and rubber-soled boots to protect themselves from injury. Some don an amazing array of additional gear--plastic wrist guards, stainless-steel mesh gloves, chain-mail aprons and chaps, baseball-catchers' shin guards, leather weightlifting belts. Even so armored, sharp knives; hot,

damp and bloody killfloors; cold, damp and slippery processing floors; and, above all, the speed of the chain make the work inherently dangerous.

Throughout the final quarter of the 20th century meatpacking recorded the highest injury and illness rate of any industry in America--about three times greater than the overall manufacturing average. Rates in poultry processing run one-half to two-thirds of those in meatpacking, largely because poultry plants are more automated. Since peaking in 1992 at an alarming rate of 44.4/100, rates of injury and illness for meatpacking workers reported to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) have declined steadily, dropping most recently into the single digits.

Escalating workers' compensation costs, record fines and greater attention to ergonomics account for some of the improvement. But President George W. Bush repealed ergonomic standards designed to reduce on-the-job repetitive motion injuries, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) eliminated the column for musculoskeletal disorders on its accident reporting form and decided employers do not have to record when workers report ergonomic injuries. And the BLS does not classify plant cleanup crews as meatpacking workers because they work on contract. How much of the dip in injury and illness rates in the first two decades of the 21st century is real, and how much is due to changes in reporting and statistical sleight of hand, is hard to say. But one thing we do know: the industry is notorious for underreporting injuries and illnesses among its workers.

> *"Nothing gets fixed until someone gets hurt. They only fix it after someone gets hurt."*
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> Beef-packing line worker, 1994

As more and more meat and poultry workers sickened from COVID-19, companies shuttered hard-hit plants over weekends for "deep cleaning" and, in some cases, for extended closures. Cargill, Perdue and National Beef upped the hourly wage for line workers. Smithfield gave $500 "responsibility bonuses" to employees who stayed on the job. Tyson paid line workers and truck drivers "thank-you bonuses" of $500 in early May and promised a second $500 in July, contingent on attendance.

The complex manager of the beef plant in Finney County, Kansas, wrote a letter to the "Tyson Foods Family" that appeared in the local newspaper, the *Garden City Telegram*, on May 2. It is worth quoting from this letter at length.

> When I look around at the more than 3,700 Tyson Foods team members at the Finney County facility who I consider family. . . . I think about the important role I have in helping make this the safest place possible to work. We're working hard to protect our team members during this ever-changing situation, while also ensuring we continue fulfilling our critical role of helping feed people across the country and keeping thousands employed. We check worker temperatures and require all team members wear surgical masks that we provide daily to each employee at the start of his or her shift. We've implemented social distancing measures, such as installing workstation dividers and barriers in our break rooms and are requiring all locations have social distancing monitors. . . . We sanitize our facilities daily and have increased sanitizing for frequently touched surfaces such as doors and tables and encourage frequent and increased hand washing. In

> March, we relaxed our attendance policy to encourage people to stay home when they're sick and we continue to remind them to follow CDC guidelines at home as well as at work.
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> No one should be fearful to go to work. Because our plants are already focused on the importance of food safety, we have always kept the environment within them clean through strict sanitary processes. During this time, we are increasing the frequency of and enhancing those processes even more. When coupled with all the other things we are doing in our plants, I truly believe they're one of the safest places to be. . . .

One of the safest places to be? In the nine days from April 28 to May 7, the number of confirmed coronavirus cases among American meat and poultry workers more than doubled: at least 11,946 workers confirmed sick and at least 48 deaths, according to the Food and Environment Reporting Network. The toll will only mount. Unless the packers move beyond the cosmetic safety measures they have taken thus far to actually restructure work on their floors. And that is not likely. As a plant safety coordinator told me: "It takes people to buy into an issue to get them to enforce regulations. Safety is not the priority; production is."

> *We're not encouraged to do a good job, just get the product out the door. . . . They don't give a shit about the people. They turn up the chain speed, people can't do their job right.*
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> Beef-packing line worker, 1994

Taking workers temperature at the start of each shift and requiring them to wear surgical masks is important, but entryways to plant floors are few. Hundreds of workers must line up at the beginning of each shift to clock in, don their smocks, hardhats and other protective gear, then clock out at shift's end, all in tight quarters where distancing is difficult and unlikely. Plant floors are places of constant, deafening noise where conversation is impossible. Workers are supposed to wear hearing protection, but earplugs, tied to headbands of hardhats, often dangle down backs. When you need to talk to someone you have to shout in their ear, learn to read lips. How can you read lips or be heard over the din of the floor if you're wearing a mask?

Workstation dividers and increased spacing between workers are all well and good, but unless plant managers reduce line speeds, workers can't properly perform their assigned task, "pull their count" in packer parlance, as the product whizzes by their station. Chain speed is crucial to maintaining a safe work environment. So is "crewing," maintaining an adequate number of qualified and experienced workers to "hit the numbers" needed to achieve mandated levels of productivity. But as a beef-plant worker said to me: "We're shorthanded out there, just continuously. Seems like we never have enough people, and when we do get crewed somebody quits or gets fired or bids off (to another job). That's not how it's designed to work, but that's how it works most generally."

When lines are "short-crewed," new-hires fill in the gaps, if they are available. New-hires, or trainees, may go off probation after 45 days, but they can't be expected to fully qualify for 90 days. Supervisors say company executives "just count bodies" when determining crew levels, but it is the ratio of qualified to unqualified bodies that really matters. "Trainees are not

supposed to be in the line, but they get put in the line if they're short-crewed. Put them in the line and injuries go up because foremans [*sic*] push new hires like everybody else."

When asked what he would do to bring workers' compensation costs down, if money were no object, the manager of the plant I studied in 1994 said he would slow down the line and maintain adequate crews. But money is always an object, and turnover and injury remain the most enduring dilemmas facing the meatpacking industry. COVID-19 has only made things worse—much worse.

As meat counters empty and prices jump, shutter ed meat and poultry plants are reopening. When they do, pressures on plant managers, line supervisors and line workers to get more and more "product out the door" mount. In recent years, USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) allowed meat and poultry plants to increase line speeds, even as it cut the number of federal inspectors. Defying all logic, as coronavirus took its toll on the nation's meat and poultry workers, FSIS granted new line-speed waivers to meat and poultry plants, including the Tyson beef plant I studied in the 1980s, to "ensure that American families have safe and wholesome food on the table."

"As they say in this business," a line supervisor told me, "'Shit flows downhill.' Some supervisors are good, some bad. The bad ones cling to the 'Big Stick approach'—do the job my way or there's the door." Corporate executives pressure plant managers to hit their numbers. In turn, they pressure floor managers, who pressure line supervisors, who pressure their crews. Being ordered or pressured to work while sick has been reported by workers at the JBS beef plant in Greeley, Colorado, and a Tyson chicken plant in Shelby County, Texas. No doubt such coercion is widespread. Attendance bonuses and increased hourly pay only add to the pressure on workers—whether healthy or sick—to come to work, even for those whose employers have waived penalties for illness-related absence. After all, wages for meat and poultry line workers place most of them at or below the federal poverty line.

Even if companies stagger start and break times, increase distance between line workers and provide surgical masks, it falls to line supervisors to enforce company guidelines. How diligently they do, will depend on directives from above, which in turn are tied to productivity. And supervisors have considerable leeway—as long as they hit their numbers. As a fired line worker told me, "One foreman will tell you this, one that, but they all have the same authority, so you can get written up even if you are following orders, merely by one foreman chewing your ass for doing what another told you to do. They try to buffalo everybody out there, and if you stand up to them they try to get rid of you."

"Interpretation is a problem on the line. You need something done, you need it done now. It is not a problem in the office; you can always get someone. But on the line, yes, it is a problem," a line supervisor complained to me. This problem will only be exacerbated by COVID-19, as coworkers are called to bridge language divides, standing close to one another and yelling to be heard above the constant racket of the line. In such situations, ear protection is quickly removed, and facemasks will be too. True, interpretation is not the problem in the office it is on the line, but it is a problem, as is translation. A wide range of translated materials exist in meat and poultry plants, from employee handbooks to formal and informal signs and postings. Unfortunately, translations are often done in-house by employees who are not trained translators and may not have adequate writing skills, technical or medical vocabulary for the job at hand.

It was the same in all the packing-house cities—and suddenly the newspapers and public woke up to face the gruesome spectacle of a meat famine. Immediately, of course, there was an uproar, and everyone fell to talking of "the paramount rights of the public." Year after year the people of Packingtown toiled and the public gave never a thought to them, to their rights or their wrongs; only now, when they are driven mad by their sufferings, did the public discover their existence. . . .

Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*

On April 20, I received a telephone call from a Minnesota farmer who sells hogs to the Smithfield plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He had contracted to sell his finished hogs for 38 cents a pound, but when he delivered his hogs he was docked 20 cents a pound because they exceeded the weight specified in his contract. He had been forced to hold them past their prime weight because the COVID outbreak had limited the number of hogs Smithfield was slaughtering. At 18 cents a pound, the farmer received only about $36 per finished hog. He was desperate and didn't know what to do. By the time he called me, the plant was shuttered, and the Smithfield buyer blamed "the government" for its closure. The farmer hoped I might know someone in USDA who could do something to open up the plant or help him get a better price for his hogs somewhere else. Smithfield's Sioux Falls plant has since reopened. But from across Canada and the United States have come reports of cattle backed up in feedyards, of farmers euthanizing hogs and chickens, dumping milk and plowing under market-ready fruits and vegetables that had been destined for schools and restaurants.

COVID-19 has created a crisis in the North American meat and poultry industry, as more and more meat and poultry workers sicken and die. Farmers and ranchers are being paid less for their animals—if they can sell them at all--while shoppers face limited meat supplies and rising prices. The COVID crisis has laid bare the deep underlying structural problems that have long plagued American agriculture in general, meat and poultry production and processing in particular. Four giant multinational corporations—two of them (Smithfield and JBS) foreign owned—account for 85 percent of beef processed in the United States, 63 percent of pork and over half of poultry. Open and competitive markets for chickens and hogs are no more, as farmers are trapped in contracts that bind them to one company and dictate how they run their operations. The cash market for cattle is all but gone, too. Today the packers own more and more of the cattle they slaughter, and they control much of the rest through "captive supply": forward contracts, formula pricing or viable producer access to only one bidder, who offers a take-it-or leave-it price.

A mere 50-odd plants slaughter and process 98 percent of all U.S. beef; three plants process 15 percent of America's pork. It is no wonder the closure of a score of meat and poultry plants disrupts the meat supply chain, stampedes consumers and rattles the nerves of government officials. But as the saying goes: Never let a crisis go to waste.

Consumer, environmental and family farm advocacy groups have long sought to reform our food system. COVID-19 has alerted the general public to problems endemic to the industrial food system, and reformers are seizing this time to push for long overdue changes. Some politicians seem to be listening. Republican senators have asked the Department of Justice to investigate possible market manipulation by beef packers who have enjoyed record profits from soaring wholesale prices and plunging cattle futures. Also in the Senate, a Democrat and a

Republican joined to call on federal antitrust enforcers to investigate meat and poultry concentration in response to numerous plant closings.

COVID-19 has opened the public's eyes to the dark underbelly of the meat and poultry industry: market concentration and monopolistic practices, low wages and unsafe working conditions for processing plant workers, exploitative contracts that keep farmers and ranchers from being paid a fair price for the animals they raise. The question is, will the public and politicians demand a more sustainable and humane food system going forward? Or will they avert their eyes when the pandemic abates, when the slaughterhouse is once more concealed from their gaze and there is plenty of meat at the grocery?

Donald D. Stull is professor emeritus of anthropology at the University of Kansas, where he taught from 1975 to 2015. His research and writing focus on the meat and poultry industry in North America, rural industrialization and rapid growth communities, industrial agriculture's impact on farmers, processing workers and host communities. Don coedited *Any Way You Cut It: Meat Processing and Small-Town America* (University Press of Kansas, 1995) and coauthored *Slaughterhouse Blues: The Meat and Poultry Industry of North* (Wadsworth, 2004, 2013). He serves on the boards of directors of the Organization for Competitive Markets (OCM), a nonprofit research and advocacy organization working for open and competitive markets and fair trade in America's food and agriculture sectors and the Socially Responsible Agriculture Project (SRAP), a national organization that provides support for communities affected by concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs).

Suggestions for Further Reading

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