

Hog-Tied

Migrant workers find themselves trapped on the pork assembly line

BY CHRISTOPHER D. COOK

After five days of cutting pig fat in northern Missouri, Sergio Rivera is ready to go home. So is his sixty-year-old father, who joined him on the Greyhound from El Paso in a desperate sojourn for work. Now they are broke in Missouri—financially and physically—and as eager to leave as they ever were to cut up pigs for Premium Standard Foods.

With a \$150 loan and plenty of promises from Premium, Sergio and his father ventured here with twenty-four other work-hungry souls from Texas. By the end of the first week, just thirteen remained. "People come here from all over—Mexico, Central America, El Paso—they stay for one or two weeks and then leave," says the elder Rivera. "The line moves too fast," he says, clutching a heavily bandaged arm that he says he injured during his week-long stint cutting pig legs.

Sergio, thirty-four, winces as he tries to close his fist. He cuts thousands of chunks of fat each day, he says, without any training or supervision. "Your wrists, elbows, arms—everything hurts," he says. "I'm still young, and I don't want my arms to be messed up."

Injured and indebted to the company, the Riveras plan to head back south to El Paso or Dallas or anywhere but the tiny, far-flung town of Green City, which Sergio bitterly calls "Lonely City."

Over a dinner of chicken mole and jalapeño peppers, Sergio's housemate, Luis, explains why he and so many others migrate so far to do this dirty and dangerous work: "We are up here because of NAFTA. There are no good-paying jobs in El Paso. They've all gone across the border where they can pay you \$5 a day."

Like many here, Luis is trying to pay off bills and get back on his feet. "I was three

months behind on my rent, and I needed a job," says Luis, a former factory worker who got his job as a neck-cutter from the El Paso unemployment office. "The job is hard, but I'm making a living and paying my rent. My family matters more than my health right now."

Welcome to the rural jungle, where migrant meatpacking workers describe conditions distressingly similar to those in Upton Sinclair's muckraking novel of nearly a century ago. While factories are cleaner and safer today, workers are subjected to dizzying line speeds. "It's still a deadly and dangerous industry," says Robyn Robbins, assistant director of health and safety for the United Food and Commercial Workers union. Turnover is higher than ever, she says, due to grueling conditions and the precarious employment of undocumented immigrant workers.

As Premium spokesman Charlie Arnot puts it: "I don't think it's a good deal different from when you saw a lot of immigrant labor coming to the East Coast in the 1920s." But today the industry recruits immigrants to isolated rural plants, says scholar Mark Grey, associate professor of anthropology at the University of Northern Iowa, who has studied the trend for ten years.

In the early 1980s, as unions lost their clout, meatpacking plants began relocating to rural nonunion areas to slash labor costs and get closer to feed and livestock farms. By the 1990s, it was standard industry practice to import workers through border-state labor recruiters who—for a fee—deliver busloads of Mexicans to plants throughout the Midwest, says Grey.

A 1998 report by the Government

Accounting Office found that 25 percent of meatpacking workers in Nebraska and Iowa are undocumented immigrants.

The situation is much the same in poultry: A 1998 survey by the U.S. Department of Labor showed that 30 percent of chicken processors conduct long-distance recruitment. National Chicken Council vice president Bill Roenigk confirms that about 50 percent of the industry's 245,000 workers are immigrants.

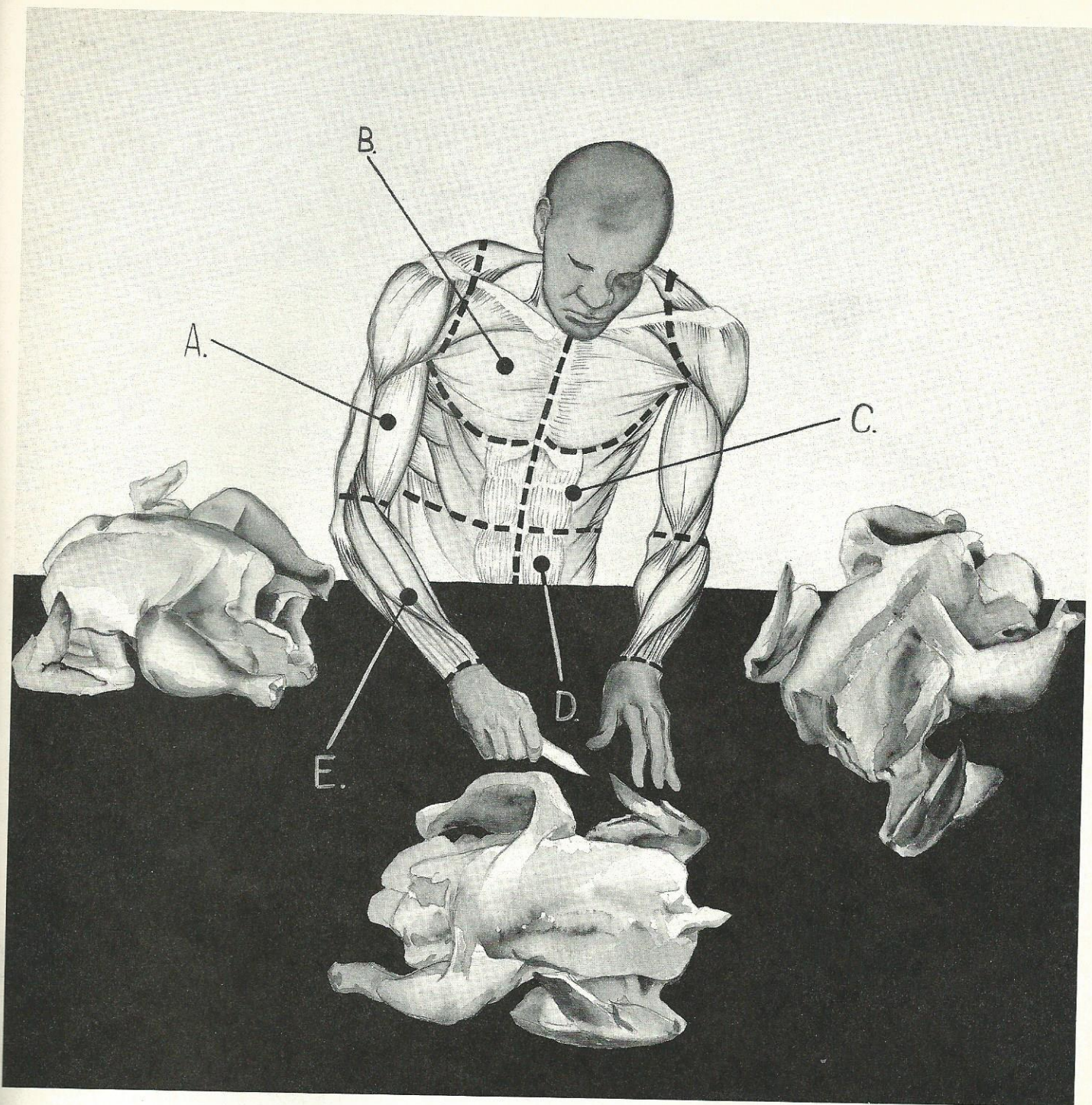
Meat production in the United States is at record levels—45.3 billion pounds in 1998, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The industry once paid workers \$30,000 a year, but it now engages a constant supply of impoverished migrants for whom \$6 to \$9 an hour seems like a godsend. Meatpackers' real wages have shrunk \$5.74 per hour since 1981, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data using 1998 dollars.

The promise of meatpacking is an empty one, delivering not prosperity but poverty and pain. A stunning 32 percent of meatpackers are injured each year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics—far more than any other industry. Employee turnover often runs far more than 100 percent per year. Yet the people keep coming, and the conditions and turnover persist.

Viewed from the sprawling parking lot at the end of a road named "Harms Way" (after Premium co-founder Dennis Harms), the Premium plant has an immaculate, information-age look. At the closely guarded entrance checkpoint, workers punch in by slipping their hands into a fingerprint identification machine. Next to the front door, a sign reads: ON THE JOB SAFETY BEGINS HERE.

Behind the polished front, assembly lines churn 7,100 pigs into packaged product each day, according to the company. José, a rib cutter, works with three others slicing rib plates into 14,200 pieces a day—3,550 cuts per person. "It's very tough," he says. "We usually take about three seconds

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for each rib, sometimes ten seconds if there's a lot of fat."

The pace leads to constant employee turnover. "Every week there are new workers, and every week others leave," says José. "In two weeks, I have seen about 200 people leave." They leave, says José, because the company keeps speeding up the assembly line.

"When we first got here, we were killing 5,000 pigs in ten hours," says Maria, a fifty-four-year-old recruit from El Paso who has worked at Premium for more than one year packing and lifting thirty-pound boxes of pig feet. "Now the belt is at full blast with less people working on the line. We

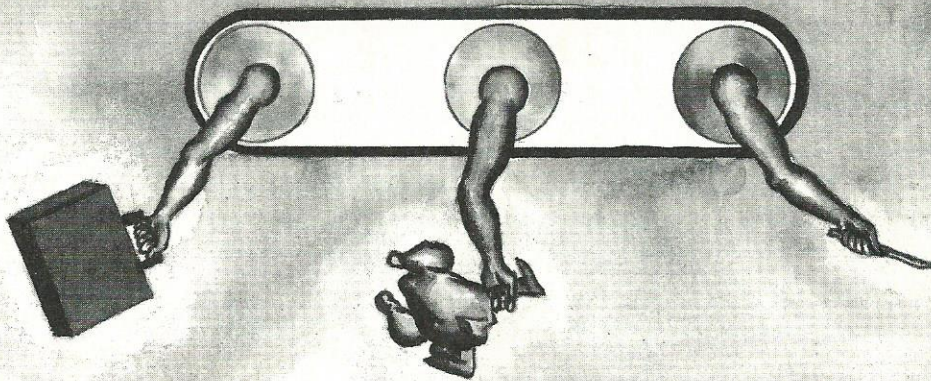
were doing pretty well when it was ten hours. Now they are trying to kill us by killing 7,100 in eight hours."

Faster lines are the primary path to bigger profits for this "very low profit-margin industry," explains Grey. "That's how they make money—jamming lots and lots of animals through the plant—and that's where your cumulative trauma problems come in." Nearly 12 percent of meatpackers succumb to cumulative trauma injuries, including carpal tunnel and tendinitis (see sidebar, page 31), as well as milder noise-related ailments, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. This is thirty-seven times the average rate for all industries.

The high-speed lines leave little time for bathroom breaks. "When they were giving us the orientations, they told us to use the bathroom before work because they would not give us permission to go during work," says José. "We have four people working, and if one went to the bathroom, we would only have three to do the same amount of work. We would be making the others work even harder."

Emma, a packing-line worker from El Paso, says she was denied bathroom trips even when she had morning sickness. Her supervisor told her to vomit in the garbage can next to the assembly line, she claims.

The workers say there is also little time



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for medical care. Sergio Rivera felt stabs of pain in his first few days at Premium. "My hand hurt, I went to the nurse, and she put me back on the line in ten minutes," he says.

Local doctor Shane Bankus, a chiropractor in Milan, about a mile away from Premium, says such treatment is the norm. The injured meat factory workers he sees "have got to get back to work, no matter how badly it hurts, which reagravates it," says Bankus. Adding to the injuries, most of the migrant workers "don't get any health insurance, because they want to send money home," says Bankus.

Like Rivera, José feels pulses of pain when he closes his fist. But when asked if he visits the company doctor, José says, "No, because the company told us if we went to the company doctor we would have to pay. None of the migrants have health insurance. It costs too much money."

A Latino migrant worker from El Paso guides me down basement steps into the one-bedroom apartment he shares with two other Premium workers. The fake wood panel walls are cracked and torn. A tiny shower stall stands at the head of one bed, next to a hot plate and a small icebox. Rusty water drips from the ceiling into a pot on another bed.

Workers share sparsely furnished, overcrowded rooms. They sleep on wooden pallets, stained mattresses, and shag-rug floors. Local resident Ed Gilber recalls that Premium "brought [workers] up here and unloaded them and they didn't have nothing"—no beds, blankets, or furniture. "If they are going to bring them up here, they ought to be made to take care of them."

Arnot says Premium isn't responsible for substandard or overcrowded housing. "We intentionally put no more than two people to a bedroom," he says, "but once people are in the houses, they make their own living arrangements. . . . We provide a lot of furnishings for those folks when they first come up. Sometimes those things stay in the house, sometimes they don't."

Arnot insists that "none of the housing that we have operates at a profit." But in at least one case, the company overcharges for the shelter it leases to workers. Area landlord Harry Frost confirms that he rents a four-bedroom house to the company for about \$400 a month. But Premium charges the six workers who live in the house \$160 each. The monthly total for that house is \$960—a \$560 profit for the company.

Rent is just one of countless deductions—including mandatory safety gear—taken from each week's paycheck. A Premium memorandum distributed to recruits in 1998 in Los Angeles shows that an employee making \$380 a week may take home as little as \$175. The company tab includes: \$50 per week during the first few weeks to repay loans for Greyhound tickets and travel money; \$40 per week for company housing; \$10 per week for rides to work in the company bus; \$30 to \$40 each week for meals in the company cafeteria. The workers pay for their meals by placing their hands in a fingerprint identification register.

That's up to \$140 out of each week's pay—before taxes. "There were many people who started at \$7.25 an hour who for the first four weeks did not take home more than \$100 a week because of all the pay-backs that were being taken out," says the Reverend Velda Bell of the United Methodist Church in nearby Trenton, who has helped some workers settle in.

Worker pay stubs reveal yet more costs. José, who was recruited by Premium in the Los Angeles unemployment office, shows me his deduction-trimmed paycheck, including a \$29 charge for "supplies"—a knife sharpener, essential to his work. Premium also charges about \$30 a pair for non-slip rubber boots, vital for navigating meat factory floors slick with blood and fat. Surveys by the United Food and Commercial Workers show many meatpacking employees are docked hundreds of dollars a year for everything from steel mesh gloves to eye goggles, ear plugs, and hair nets. The union found that poultry and

meatpacking companies often overcharge their workers for protective gear. For instance, latex gloves typically cost workers \$1.45 a pair, while companies pay just twelve cents to suppliers. Protective arm sleeves can cost workers up to five times what companies pay.

José has found one way to save money. "I don't eat very much [at the company cafeteria] because it's very expensive and I wouldn't have any money left," he says. Workers are not allowed to bring their own food for lunch, Maria says: "I have seen people try to take their own food, and if they get caught they get fired or suspended."

On a cold winter night, the scratched windows of the Milan laundromat are fogged in, and you can hear men talking quietly in Spanish. They're not doing laundry. This is their hangout, where they share pizza, beer, and stories about working and living in an alien land.

Regulo Luhan, who worked in the company's cold room for three months before succumbing to a leg circulation injury, says there is "antipathy toward Mexicans and blacks." To demonstrate this, he points out graffiti on the laundry bathroom walls: REMEMBER THE ALAMO; HISPANICS CAUSING PANIC; NIGGERS AND MEXICANS NEED TO LEAVE MY COUNTRY, OUR GIRLS, OUR WOMEN ALONE OR DIE. At the ConAgra chicken plant in Milan, where Luhan now works, "Some workers put up Nazi signs saying they are the pure race, and put up a sign about the Ku Klux Klan," he says.

Arnold, an El Pasoan who has examined hog carcasses for Premium since August 1998, says when he and a friend were attacked by several white men wielding knives, a police officer on the scene "sat and watched, didn't do nothing. He turned a blind eye. He told us this is redneck country."

However, some residents and church groups have welcomed the workers and tried to help them out socially and economically.

The Reverend Bell's church has orga-

A Premium Lawsuit

As meatpacking's casualties pile up, some of the wounded—including longtime local residents—are fighting back in court.

To support his wife and eleven children, Abel Merino left his ranch in the southern Mexican state of Michoacán in 1997 to work at Premium Standard's Missouri slaughterhouse. He was brought to Premium by a labor recruiter in El Paso who charges the company \$200 for each worker he delivers, says attorney Francisco Dominguez of Texas Rural Legal Aid.

On April 14, 1997, during his twelve-hour nightly shift cleaning the assembly line, the forty-eight-year-old Merino tried to remove a chunk of meat that was stuck in a machine. But the line was still moving (supervisors told him the line could never stop, he says), and the motor pulled him in, crushing his arm and breaking a bone that ripped through the skin. He was caught in the machine for more than five minutes before he freed himself. He was taken to the emergency room and underwent surgery the next day.

Then, Merino charges in a lawsuit filed with five other migrant workers, the company pressured him to return to work despite his crippling injury. About a month after the accident, Premium "wanted me to go back. . . . But I told them that I couldn't because my hand was still bleeding and my leg was still bleeding [surgeons had taken flesh from his leg to graft onto his arm] and I would get dizzy," Merino testified in depositions. "They told me that if I didn't go back to work, then there wouldn't be any money. . . . And I didn't have anything to eat."

Dominguez says Premium "harassed him to go back to work. They said, 'If you don't work, we don't pay you. And if we don't pay you, you are going to have to move out of the company housing.'"

In addition to alleging that the company harassed injured workers, the suit charges Premium with making false promises (all verbal) of free housing and transportation when recruiting the workers, then overcharging them for "vermin-infested" rooms, cafeteria meals, and rides to work.

Olivia Rascón, another plaintiff in the case, says after six months of cutting meat with a round electric wizard knife, "my hands were completely closed" and in constant pain. But, she says, "the company said I had to keep working. . . . The doctor [employed by the company] said I was fine," and gave her wooden splints to pry open her fingers. For the next four months, she worked in the factory laundry room, but the pain persisted. "They told me I shouldn't complain or I might lose my job," she claims. Then, in March 1998, Premium fired her.

Company spokesman Charlie Arnot would not discuss the

lawsuit, but says that harassing injured workers "certainly is not the policy, nor do I believe it is the practice of that facility. We have a dedicated safety and wellness staff . . . that work very diligently to make sure people receive the therapy they need in order to return to work when they are ready."

The lawsuit seeks compensatory and punitive damages for Premium's alleged fraudulent promises about wages and housing arrangements, and its alleged retaliation against injured workers. It is part of a growing file of complaints by migrant meat factory workers. Dominguez says his office is preparing similar cases against Tyson chicken plants in Union City, Tennessee, and Ashland, Alabama; Minnesota Beef in Buffalo Lakes, Minnesota; Nebraska Beef in Omaha; Thornapple Valley in Ponca City, Oklahoma; Choctaw Maid Farms in Carthage, Mississippi; and Excel in Beardstown, Illinois.

The lawsuits are breaking new legal ground, arguing that itinerant meat workers, like migrant farmworkers, should get protections against false recruiting promises about housing and wages. Federal judge William Wayne Justice of Texas ruled last March that twenty-four migrant poultry workers suing Case Farms of Ohio are covered by migrant farmworker protections. Attorneys for Case Farms did not respond to several requests for comment.

Forty-year-old Connie Mayer, a lifelong resident who lives in Unionville, Missouri, shows a long purple streak running down her arm to her mangled left hand—the result, she says, of cutting pig ears for Premium. It took just six weeks of holding and cutting apart pig temples (each new head would hit her hand before she could finish cutting the previous head, she says) before she had suffered severe nerve damage.

Mayer and her doctor insisted she needed surgery, she says, but her supervisors said she had to keep working. Soon Premium "fired the doctor who wanted to do my surgery," says Mayer. Then, when Mayer pursued workers' compensation to finance surgery on her arm, Premium supervisors harassed and attacked her, she alleges in a separate lawsuit, filed in 1997. It is still unresolved.

Mayer's complaint says vindictive supervisors assigned her to "one of the most detested jobs" in the plant—sorting pig livers, spleens, and lungs. Then, in April 1995, they "deliberately" dumped "pig kidneys, pig urine, pig blood, and other pig carcass fluids" on her as she worked. "When you stop making them money, they want you gone," she says.

Company spokesman Arnot said he could not comment on any aspect of the case.

—C.C.

nized furniture and clothing donations and pro bono legal and accounting advice for the workers—basic efforts, she says, to "preserve dignity and allow people to have value in their lives." Bell also persuaded some area grocery stores to carry Mexican products and teach their employees basic Spanish. And some schools are adjusting by adding English as a Second Language to their curriculum.

But while these efforts may help ease the workers' alienation, geographic isolation and difficult working conditions assure that most of these workers view Packingtown, USA, as a gritty pit stop on the way—they hope—to something better.

Arnot says Premium wants to "reduce turnover and to have a much more stable

work force." He says the company plans to finance starter-home developments and encourage workers to settle and become "long-term residents in the community."

But Grey and other critics, including the United Food and Commercial Workers, contend that meatpacking firms prefer short-term, destabilized workers so they can cut injury costs and evade unions. A migrant and immigrant work force, says Grey, also enables companies to "pass along a lot of costs"—such as unemployment and disability payments—to the workers' home country.

Union official Jerry Helmick says that Premium successfully derailed a 1997 attempt to organize the plant with a massive campaign to recruit migrant workers.

Just as the union secured majority support in the plant, Helmick says, Premium brought in its first wave of recruited workers, who were, because of their precarious position, reluctant to join the fight.

"Instead of dealing with the wages, working conditions, and injury rates, [meatpacking firms] are just trying to find new ways to cycle through new workers," says Grey. "Ultimately, their concern is not about a stable work force but maintaining a transient work force."

And transient they are—at least so far. José the rib-cutter says he, like the Riveras, will soon leave in search of better work. But he adds: "If they paid a little more money and ran the line a little slower, the people wouldn't leave. I wouldn't leave." ■