

# The Big Picture

CONTEXT ON THE  
WORLD WE LIVE IN



EDITORIAL PAGES | 22-23A

Columnist Jack Betts asks: Is there a curse on Charlotte politicians?

## THE CRUELEST CUTS

First of Six Parts



THE HUMAN COST  
OF BRINGING POULTRY  
TO YOUR TABLE

# AN EPIDEMIC OF PAIN

Growing demand for specialty cuts threatens workers' hands more than ever

BY PETER ST. ONGE, FRANCO ORDOÑEZ,  
KERRY HALL AND AMES ALEXANDER  
Staff Writers

The pain would come, she knew. As sure as the turkeys coming down the line, about 30 each minute, ready to be gutted and clipped and deboned and sliced.

Karina Zorita knew this, almost four years ago, as she considered a job at House of Raeford Farms, the poultry plant along the highway near her home in rural Eastern North Carolina.

It's dangerous, her friends warned. Too painful. *Tus Manos*.

Your hands.

She knew this. But she didn't know.

She couldn't know that in poultry plants across America, workers are imperiling their hands and wrists simply by coming to work each day. She couldn't know that injuries often come from doing the job as instructed, that doctors say the thousands of pulling and cutting and digging motions required daily at poultry plants can cause irreversible damage.

Like black lung in the coal industry and brown lung in textiles, the hands of the poultry industry suffer a long-neglected threat. Two decades ago, musculoskeletal disorders at poultry and meatpacking plants prompted a public outcry. Legislators and government officials vowed change.

Now, an Observer investigation shows, the hands of poultry workers are more threatened than ever.

America's growing demand for specialty cuts presents an ergonomic nightmare for workers. At the plants, regulatory inspections have decreased. On the line, the work force has become predominantly Latino, often illegal, more exploitable.

Observer reporters spoke to more than 130 workers who say they were injured on the job at 13 plants in the Carolinas and Georgia. About three-fourths complained of hand and wrist injuries.

"An epidemic," says Lance Compa, a Cornell instructor and Human Rights Watch author who in 2004 interviewed dozens of employees at U.S. poultry plants and remembers none who didn't suffer a work-related affliction. Most, he says, were in the hands and wrists.

"Inhumane," says Steve Striffler, a University of Arkansas anthropologist and author who spent two three-month stretches working in Tyson chicken plants this decade and remembers: "Anyone that I saw that worked anywhere on the line for six months definitely had a hand or wrist injury." Most of his co-workers, he says, were Latino.



Striffler

"Once I shake their hands, I know what they do," says Pablo Forestier, a doctor at the Latin American Family Medical Clinic in Monroe, where he often sees workers from the nearby Tyson plant. Most, he says, begin to suffer after only two months of grabbing and cutting and squeezing. Few, however, complain about it at work, for fear they will lose their job.

Tyson spokesperson Gary Mickelson said the company requires all employees to report every work-related injury or illness, no matter how small, allowing the company to "dramatically reduce any potential severity." Industry officials say that poultry work is now a safer occupation, with more ergonomically designed workstations and tools — and more machines replacing humans for tasks such as gutting birds.

"Workplace safety is a key objective and core value for all poultry processing companies..." said National Chicken Council spokesperson Richard Lobb, pointing to U.S. Labor Department surveys that show a steady decline since 2000 in reported poultry work injuries.

Critics say those numbers are misleading, that companies often ignore and underreport the injuries workers do complain about.

Karina Zorita knew none of these statistics. She was an illegal immigrant, 28 years old and single, a mother whose two young sons remained in Chilpancingo, Mexico.

She took the House of Raeford job, working as "Epenisa," the name on the fake ID card she purchased after she came to Raeford.

She said she made about \$6.50 an hour, weighing turkey breasts.

More than a year later, she was moved to a different part of the line, where she pulled bones from cooked turkey with her fingers.

The pain came. She knew it would.

She just didn't know how devastating it would be.



JOHN D. SIMMONS - jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

After less than a year of pulling bones out of cooked turkey breasts and thighs at House of Raeford, Karina Zorita says she is unable to straighten her fingers, or grab a spoon or glass. Said a friend: "My daughter (Guadalupe Pablo, pictured here) hugs her, but she can't hug her back."

GRAPHIC  
UNAVAILABLE

SEE HANDS | 16A

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N.C. company masks the extent of injuries inside Carolinas plants.

### ONLINE VIDEO

Scenes from inside a poultry plant; hear workers talk about their pain.

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