

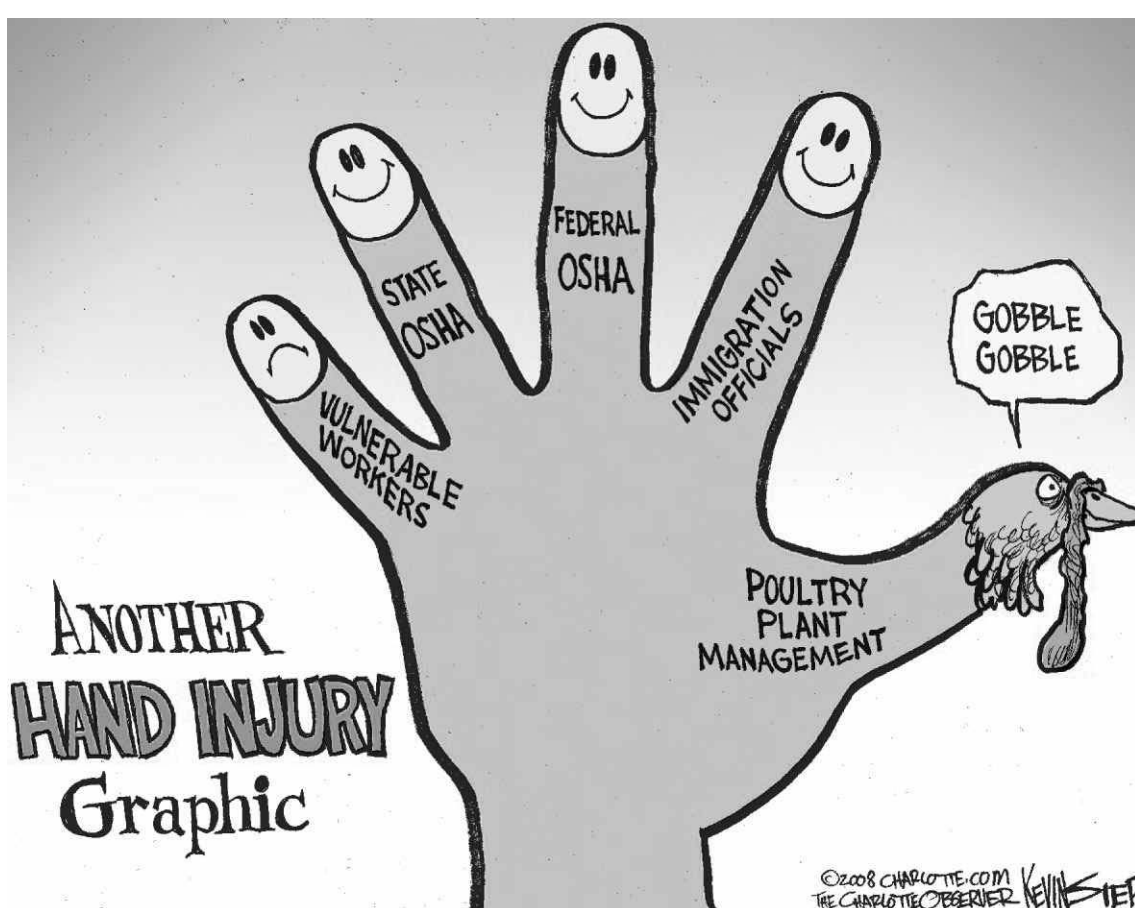
Editorials

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Agenda for reform: Here are the Observer's editorials about poultry workers' safety. The Editorial Board consists of Publisher Ann Caulkins, Editorial Page Editor Ed Williams and Associate Editors Fannie Flono, Jack Betts and Mary Schulken.

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Karina Zorita

SPOILED MEAT YOUR TURKEY SANDWICH COMES WITH A SIDE OF PAIN

Sunday, February 10, 2008

What happened to Karina Zorita just isn't decent. Yet it's commonplace in pain factories such as the ones in the Carolinas where thousands of poultry workers clean and debone America's best-selling meat.

Ms. Zorita, 32, is a former line worker for House of Raeford, a poultry processor in Eastern North Carolina. Her painful, crippled hands don't show up on any government injury report. But an Observer investigation has documented her plight - and the injuries suffered by other workers like her.

The shameful truth? Feeble rules and lax oversight have made it easy for a dangerous industry to exploit illegal workers, underreport injuries and manipulate a regulatory system that essentially lets companies police themselves.

The Observer's report begins today, and continues for six days. It focuses heavily on Ms. Zorita's former employer. Among the findings:

House of Raeford has broken state law by failing to record injuries on government safety logs.

The government is inspecting poultry plants less often because fewer injuries are reported. Yet it rarely checks to see whether companies such as House of Raeford are reporting accurately.

The company's Greenville, S.C., plant kept a five-year safety streak alive by bringing injured employees back to the factory hours after surgery.

Musculoskeletal disorders are the most common work-related ailments affecting poultry workers, yet at least one 800-worker House of Raeford plant in West Columbia, S.C., reported no MSD's over a four-year period - which experts say is inconceivable.

The bottom line? Tens of thousands of workers in the Carolinas who use their hands to cut, sort and package hundreds of birds an hour are subjected to injury and inhumane treatment. Many of them, such as Ms. Zorita, are illegal immigrants, powerless to complain.

Policies set by state and federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration agencies are tilted toward business and industry, not protecting workers.

If that makes you angry - and it should - here's something you can do. Contact Sen. Elizabeth Dole, R-N.C. Tell her we need a federal investigation into hiring practices, working conditions and injury reporting by poultry processors.

Tell her we need specific rules state and federal OSHA agencies can use to police industries where there's a high risk of MSD disorders.

While you're at it, tell her we also need enough federal money for states such as North and South Carolina to enforce rules in a meaningful way.

Why Sen. Dole? She knows a lot about the issue. As Labor Secretary for President George H.W. Bush, she pushed for worker protections, including solid ergonomics safety standards to protect workers from MSDs. Now, those rules have been tossed aside by the current Bush Administration. Sen. Dole ought to speak out.

After three years of gutting, clipping, deboning and slicing turkeys that came her way at a rate of about 30 a minute, Karina Zorita struggles to grasp a spoon or hold a broom, brush her hair or pick up a glass of water with her swollen, gnarled hands.

That's wrong. It's time to stop the pain.

Contact Sen. Elizabeth Dole

As Labor Secretary she pushed safety standards tossed by the Bush Administration. Contact her at 202-224-6342 or go to dole.senate.gov and click on contact Sen. Dole.



Dole

NEEDED: A WATCHDOG

OSHA TOO OFTEN FAILS TO PROTECT POULTRY WORKERS' SAFETY

Monday, February 11, 2008

Marvin Johnson is not the only businessman to try and get his way on worker safety. The trouble is, when special interests go too far, government oversight becomes a joke. Workers pay the price in pain.



Johnson

That's happening in Mr. Johnson's poultry processing plants in the Carolinas, and likely elsewhere. It's shameful. It won't change until state and federal lawmakers stand up for workers by passing strong, specific worker safety rules and approving funding to enforce them effectively.

An 18-month Observer investigation uncovered a record of pain, injury and poor treatment of workers in Mr. Johnson's House of Raeford factories in the Carolinas. Slack oversight and slack rules have made it easy for a dangerous industry to exploit illegal workers, underreport injuries and manipulate a regulatory system that essentially lets companies police themselves.

Among the findings:

House of Raeford broke state law by failing to record injuries on government safety logs.

At four of the company's largest Carolinas plants, first-aid attendants and supervisors have dismissed workers' requests for a doctor's care.

The company's Greenville, S.C., plant kept a five-year safety streak alive by returning employees to the factory hours after surgery.

How can those things happen? Nobody's watching. The government is inspecting poultry plants less because it says fewer injuries are being reported. Yet it rarely checks to see whether reports are accurate.

Another factor: The voices of businessmen such as Mr. Johnson carry more weight with enforcers and elected officials than the voices of injured workers.

Today, an Observer profile of Mr. Johnson shows he has built his poultry empire while repeatedly defying government regulators and backing political candidates who are sympathetic to the meat industry.

His success has helped tilt the policies of federal and state Occupational Safety and Health Administration agencies toward business and industry and away from worker protection.

The record of Mr. Johnson's own company shows why that's wrong. Specifically, the Observer's investigation found it ignored and fired workers who complained about injuries. It has been cited for at least 130 serious workplace violations since 2000 - among the most of any poultry company.

Behind those statistics are workers such as Claudette Outerbridge of Raeford, who pulled out turkey guts and trimmed parts, and was brushed off and given a cream when she reported intense hand pain. That's disgraceful.

Taxpayers aren't paying for oversight that plays lapdog to business, we're paying for oversight that protects workers. Changes ought to start with these steps by lawmakers:

Launching a federal investigation to look into hiring practices, working conditions and injury reporting in poultry processors.

Reinstating critical federal ergonomic safety standards thrown out by the Bush Administration in 2001.

Increasing federal funding to help states such as North and South Carolina enforce rules in dangerous industries.

THROWAWAY WORKERS

GIVE IMMIGRANT WORKERS THE BASIC PROTECTIONS THEY NEED

Tuesday, February 12, 2008

You may not like the fact illegal immigrants break the law to come to this country for jobs. Yet they do come, and Americans want the low-priced products and services their cheap labor provides. But we should be appalled by what's happening to thousands of immigrant workers who do dangerous, dirty work in pain factories in the Carolinas.

They are being exploited, abused, then thrown away when they are injured or when they speak up. Companies can get away with it, in part, because politicians in Washington don't have the conscience or will to fix failed immigration policies.

Here are the facts: A 22-month Observer investigation into poultry processing found that feeble rules and lax oversight have made it easy for a dangerous industry to exploit illegal workers, underreport injuries and manipulate a regulatory system that essentially lets companies police themselves.

In particular, the report found that poultry processor House of Raeford is relying heavily on Latino immigrants to do dangerous jobs for low pay. When workers complain, their complaints are ignored. When they are hurt, crippling injuries are often hidden from government scrutiny.

That treatment is by no means exclusive to meat processing. The truth is, illegal immigrants exist in the shadows. They are perfect

RULES? WHAT RULES?

GAPING HOLES IN REGULATORY SAFETY NET MEAN PAIN FOR WORKERS

Thursday, February 14, 2008

After a conveyor broke her arm and ripped off the tip of a finger, a worker in a poultry plant in Greenville, S.C., was back on the job the next morning. Cornelia Vicente said the plant nurse told her at the hospital she had no choice.

Think that sounds right? Neither do we. Ms. Vicente, a former line worker for House of Raeford, is one of hundreds of poultry workers interviewed by the Observer during a 22-month investigation. It found weak safety rules and slack government oversight have made it easy for a dangerous industry to exploit illegal workers and underreport injuries.

You can read Ms. Vicente's story today, the fifth in a six-part Observer series. It shows how, in many cases, hurt workers (often illegal immigrants such as Ms. Vicente) endured inhumane treatment or wound up with permanent injuries because gaping holes in the regulatory safety net lets companies such as House of Raeford get around rules about reporting accidents.

The Observer found the House of Raeford plant where Ms. Vicente worked kept a five-year safety streak going by sidestepping regulations and rushing hurt employees back to work.

Reporters found that many workers reporting hand pain from repetitive motion injuries at House of Raeford were given painkillers and sent back to work, not sent to a doctor.

How could such things happen? Rules and oversight by federal and state Occupational Safety and Health agencies are toothless when it comes to such medical practices.

For one thing, companies aren't required to provide suitably-trained on-site medical staff, even in poultry processing plants, where the risk of dismemberment and musculoskeletal disorders is high.

Meanwhile, there's financial incentive not to do the right thing when employees are injured. A company saves money when it doesn't have to compensate workers for lost time or medical care. Sending injured employees back to work also keeps their names off a plant's injury logs and helps avoid scrutiny from safety regulators.

Those loopholes need to be closed - now. Reform should begin with a federal investigation that focuses on hiring practices, working conditions and injury reporting by poultry processors in the Carolinas. That inquiry should include a specific, in-depth look at



Celia Lopez

government oversight and worker safety rules for poultry plants. Neither is working. Celia Lopez lifted and weighed hundreds of turkey breasts each day at a House of Raeford plant near Fayetteville. When her hands began to throb, a company first-aid attendant gave her pain relievers and sent her back to work. When she finally saw a

doctor on her own and had surgery for carpal tunnel injury, it may have been too late: The damage could have been avoided, but now it may be permanent.

That's an outrage. Nobody should have to pay that price. Close outrageous loopholes

Carolinas lawmakers should call for a federal investigation that focuses on hiring practices, working conditions and injury reporting by poultry processors in the two states.

targets for unscrupulous employers, and many freely take advantage of them. Having that kind of sub-class is in no one's best interest.

First things first. Carolinas lawmakers ought to call for a federal investigation into hiring practices, working conditions and injury reporting by poultry processors. The record is clear: No one is watching out for workers who perform risky, repetitive work on high-speed processing lines.

Job No. 2 is comprehensive immigration reform. Politicians in Washington have put rigid ideological views and emotional demagoguery above reasoned compromise. The U.S. needs sensible reform that secures borders, expands the guest worker program and provides a path to legal status for illegal workers already here.

The nation's outdated immigration policies are not adapted to a global economy. Think about it: There are jobs on this side of the southern border. On the other side? Intense poverty and hundreds and thousands of willing workers who want those jobs. Yet guest worker programs and immigration quotas severely curtail who can come here legally. It's despicable for this nation and its elected officials to ignore reforms that would give immigrant workers the basic protection decency demands.

It's easy to take a hard line on illegal workers. It's much harder to see their plight, and take practical policy steps to prevent the kinds of abuses that left Karina Zorita, 32, a former House of Raeford worker, with gnarled and damaged hands.

Remember this: They are human beings. Yet that's not how they are treated. They are treated as desecrables - disposables. That's wrong.