



**WHAT MEAT MEANS**

*an Editorial in the New York Times*

Most Americans do not want to know how the meat they eat is produced, if only so they can continue to eat it. Nearly every aspect of meat production in America is disturbing, from the way animals are raised, to inadequate inspection of the final product. When it comes to what happens in the slaughterhouse, most of us mentally avert our eyes. Yet in the past decade, the handling of livestock on their way to the killing floor has actually been one of the parts of the business that has improved most significantly.

What is most alarming at the slaughterhouse is not what happens to the animals - they have already met their fate. It is what happens to the humans who work there. A large slaughterhouse is the truly industrial end of industrial farming. It is a factory for disassembly. Its high line speeds place enormous pressure on the workers hired to take apart the carcasses coming down the line. And because the basic job of the line is cutting flesh - hard, manual labor - the dangers are very high for meat workers, whose flesh is every bit as vulnerable as that of the pork beef or chicken passing by. The problem of worker safety is compounded by the fact that meatpackers, driven by the brutal economics of the industry, always try to hire the cheapest labor they can find. That increasingly means immigrants whose language difficulties compound the risks of the job. The result, according to a new report by Human Rights Watch, is "extraordinarily high rates of injury" in conditions that systematically violate human rights. In fact, the report finds, some major players in the American meat industry prey upon a large population of immigrant workers who are either ignorant of their fundamental rights or are undocumented aliens who are afraid of calling attention to themselves.

As a result, those workers often receive little or no compensation for injuries, and any attempt to organize is met with hostility. The industry has little incentive to improve conditions on its own, except a decent regard for human rights. The only reasonable prospect of improvement depends on the enforcement of federal and state law. Unfortunately, those laws at present are too weak and too riddled with loopholes to provide the regulations needed to increase worker safety and improve workers' rights. A systematic regulatory look at the meat industry, with an eye to toughening standards, is desperately needed. In recent years, Americans have had the habit of thinking of wide-scale workplace abuses as foreign affairs - the kind of thing that turns up in Southeast Asia, for instance. And, in a sense, the abuses found in American slaughterhouses are international matters, because so many of the workers are actually citizens of other countries. But in this case, the abuses are taking place right at home, and as part of our food chain.

In a carb-conscious era, the meat processing industry should be a place of opportunity for workers who put all that protein on your plate. Right now, that is hardly the case.

# UNION NEWS

## NZ Meat Industry has highest Musculoskeletal Disorders(MSD)

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) is a term used to describe a wide range of conditions that affect muscles, tendons, nerves, bones and joints. MSD can also be called Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, Occupational Overuse Injuries (OOI), Cumulative trauma disorders and repetitive strain injuries (RSI).

Many meat workers complain to their foreman/Doctor "when I get home, I can barely move my hands or arms after working all day on the chain. I can't hardly sleep because of the pain..." then the company doctor or WorkAON tells me I did it at home, or it is "old age", or I have arthritis, or I am told to "harden up" and get back on the job, or its my fault that I ended up with MSD, or take some more anti-inflammatory "Voltaren" pills to ease the pain not knowing I could end up with a stomach ulcer.

**DON'T BE INTIMIDATED, KNOW YOUR RIGHTS**

Increases in productivity and production have had a significant impact on the pace of

work and other physical risk factors in meat processing. This reported increase in productivity of meat exported, which rose significantly between 1980 (23 tonnes per person employed in meat processing) and 2007 (38.1 tonnes), a 66% increase.

Increases in average carcass weight over a similar period are around 30% for sheep and 15% for beef. Task complexity has also increased markedly over this period due to hygiene compliance and a wider range of further processing requirements. This has added greatly to the range of skills that meat processing workers need, while training has been of a minimalist nature. Workers who return to work to early following MSD injury face an increased risk of injury where the work pace is too great for the current level of rehabilitation. MSD risks are increased, through reducing staffing levels, recovery time and training time, along with increasing work pace & processing requirements for certain tasks.

## Overseas markets hold up!



The ANZ Commodity Price Index recorded another fall in January - its sixth consecutive monthly decline - with a drop of 4.3% in January.

However, on the positive side of the ledger there were improving beef and lamb prices, both of which grew 3.5% in the month. Meat Industry Association member companies report current sales returns from lamb are well up on those 12 months ago. "This is illustrated by NZX Agrifax data which shows earnings for lamb cuts to the EU are up 30% on the same time last year and racks and forequarters into Asia and the US are up 28%. This is significant and even with

uncertain times, given the global financial crises, we remain cautiously positive going forward" says Bill Falconer MIA Chairman also adding that beef into North America tells a similar story. Current beef returns are 25-30% ahead of a year ago.

Drought and dairy expansion have reduced this year's lamb numbers to 27.3 million - a drop of 4.7 million. Export lamb numbers are estimated to fall 6.15 million to 20.36 million a decrease of 23.2%.

Heavier carcass weights offset lower export lamb numbers. Lamb carcass weights are estimated to be up 7.5% on last year to 17.7kg.

As at Week 23 of the season Saturday 7th March '09 the NZ lamb kill is down 11.6% (NI down 9.8% - SI down 13%) and the cattle kill is up 4.8% (NI up 3.3% - SI up 9.9%) Cow kill up 31.4% NI (07/08 147,094 to 08/09 193,214) Cow kill up 92.7% SI (07/08 30,313 to 08/09 58,409)