

**An Evaluation of Worker Health and Safety at the  
Tyson Fresh Meats Plant in Pasco, Washington**

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Prepared by:

Mark Brenner  
Assistant Research Professor  
Political Economy Research Institute  
University of Massachusetts  
Gordon Hall 418 N. Pleasant St, Suite A  
Amherst, MA 01002  
413-577-0241 (phone)  
413-577-0261 (fax)  
brenner@peri.umass.edu  
<http://www.markbrenner.net>

and

Paul Apostolidis  
Associate Professor and Chair  
Department of Politics  
Whitman College  
345 Boyer Ave.  
Walla Walla WA 99362  
509-522-4426 (phone)  
509-527-5026 (fax)  
apostopc@whitman.edu

## I. Introduction

Since 2001 we have been examining the interrelated issues of staffing levels, production speed and working conditions at the Tyson Fresh Meats plant (formerly Iowa Beef Processors – IBP) in Pasco, Washington.<sup>1</sup> Using publicly available company records, as well as quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews of the plant workforce, our study provides an invaluable window into the operations of a modern meatpacking plant in the United States. Our work strongly suggests that the productivity gains and cost savings that have sustained the profits of U.S. meatpackers over the past generation are the result of striking sacrifices in the area of worker health and safety. Tyson’s Pasco plant provides ample evidence of this trend:

- In 2002 Tyson’s Pasco plant had a serious injury rate nearly three times the meatpacking industry average. Given that the meatpacking industry itself had the highest rate of serious injury in the country, this means that Tyson’s Pasco plant is one of the most dangerous workplaces in the United States.
- More than three-quarters (78.7 percent) of the workers in Tyson’s Pasco plant report work-related health problems in the year prior to our survey.
- Approximately sixty percent of those workers sent to the plant infirmary did not receive the level of medical attention they were expecting.
- More than a third (37.0 percent) of workers had personally experienced problems when on light duty, including harassment by supervisors, disciplinary write-ups or changes in their shift schedule.
- Nearly two-thirds (64.0 percent) of workers believe that the company mistreats workers on light duty to discourage other individuals from going on light duty.
- Ninety percent of workers felt that the chain speed contributed to the accidents and injuries in their work area, and three-quarters also reported that understaffing was a contributing factor.

We believe these results are indicative of the conditions that prevail throughout the meatpacking industry. This follows first from the fact that Tyson’s Pasco plant is an extremely large meatpacking facility, one of only 52 meatpacking plants of its kind with more than 1000 employees. While large establishments like this comprise only a handful of the beef processing facilities in the country, they account for nearly three-quarters of the employment. Industry consolidation trends suggest that over time more and more of beef processing in the country will be performed in large facilities like Tyson’s Pasco plant.

Second, of course, is the fact that this plant is part of one of the largest beef operations in the world. Since its acquisition of IBP in 2001 Tyson has become the largest producer of fresh beef in the United States, comprising approximately 27 percent of the national market. Together with the three other top firms in the industry, Tyson accounts for more than 80 percent of the beef produced in the U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> In most government documents the plant location is officially recorded as Wallula, WA. However, because the plant location is commonly held to be in Pasco, WA we refer to it as such throughout this report.

It is also the case that the Tyson beef-processing network, in its previous incarnation as Iowa Beef Processors, is often credited with revolutionizing the meatpacking industry. IBP pioneering the construction of large facilities, the integration of slaughter and meat-processing, and the introduction of products such as “boxed beef”. This current and historic position of Tyson as an industry leader suggests that, if anything, the typical meatpacking facility of tomorrow will look more rather than less like Tyson’s Pasco plant of today. Given the facts presented in this report, this is truly an unsettling conclusion.

## II. The Transformation of U.S. Meatpacking

Over the course of the last generation the U.S. meatpacking industry has witnessed a series of dramatic transformations. New technologies, industry consolidation, and shifting consumer demand have all had a profound impact on the way cattle are slaughtered and processed in the United States. Before examining the situation of Tyson’s Pasco plant, it is useful to situate its record within the transformation of U.S. meatpacking.

Since the 1960s U.S. meatpacking has experienced a radical reorganization. The primary result has been a substantial consolidation throughout the industry. **Table 1** reveals several of its key features. First, we can see the number of beef slaughter plants have fallen dramatically, from 1,818 in 1963 to 215 by 1992. We can also see that over this same period a greater and greater share of total beef production has come from large plants. Between 1963 and 1992 the share of industry shipments coming from plants with 400 or more employees rose from 31 percent to 72 percent. At the same time that production shifted to a small number of very large slaughterhouses, the ownership of these plants became increasingly concentrated. From the third column in Table 1 we see that the four largest firms in the meatpacking industry comprised 26 percent of all beef shipments in 1963, with the share rising steadily to 71 percent of all beef shipments by 1992. By the mid-1990s these four firms controlled more than 80 percent of the industry.

Unfortunately for the dominant meatpacking firms, consolidation into a handful of large plants has not produced substantial cost savings. Economies of scale in meatpacking remain relatively modest, and the nation’s largest plants have a cost advantage of only 3 to 5 percent over competitors one-quarter their size (MacDonald et al, 2000). As such, large meatpacking firms have sought cost savings in other arenas, most notably by squeezing wages and benefits, attacking pattern bargaining, and shifting work into non-union plants (Horowitz, 2002). As **Table 2** demonstrates, wages in the meatpacking industry have fallen precipitously over the past thirty years. Indeed real wages for production workers have been cut almost in half, falling from \$20 per hour in 1977 to just under \$10.50 by 2001. One clear explanation for this steep slide in wages has been the dramatic decline in union density over this same period, falling from more than 40 percent in the 1970s to just over 16 percent in 2003.<sup>2</sup> This rapid shift in union density is primarily the result of aggressive confrontations between the largest meatpackers and their unions in the early 1980s. These labor disputes effectively ended the national master contract in meatpacking and resulted in the closure of many unionized facilities (Horowitz 2002; MacDonald et al. 2000).

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<sup>2</sup> See Kokkelenberg and Sockell (1985) for estimates of union density in the meat products industry in the 1970s. The 2003 union density rate is calculated by the authors from the Current Population Survey.

However lowering labor costs *per se* can only produce modest benefits in the meatpacking industry. Since the 1960s production worker wages have never comprised more than seven or eight percent of total costs, which has led the largest firms to aggressively pursue increased productivity alongside lowered wages. Although increased capital intensity is one means of increasing labor productivity, the main method in meatpacking has been a ratcheting up of production speeds since unlike many other industries, meatpacking remains somewhat impervious to large-scale mechanization. This relentless pursuit of faster production speeds has only worsened the already grim health and safety record of the meatpacking industry. For example, the rate of total illnesses and injuries in meatpacking is consistently between two and three times the national average and more than ten times the national average if we consider illnesses on their own.<sup>3</sup> This situation, particularly the stunning rise in injuries and illnesses in meatpacking over the 1980s has attracted national attention.

Between 1987 and 1988 the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) levied unprecedented fines on IBP (now owned by Tyson) and John Morrell (now owned by Smithfield Foods), and as a result of its settlement agreement with IBP the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) launched a series of plant studies in the industry.<sup>4</sup> The synthesis of several of these plant studies concluded that the extreme health and safety problems in the 1980s were due to a combination of mechanization, job fragmentation, and an increase in the pace of work. These authors noted that “[i]ncreased efforts to restore profitability in this industry took precedence over other matters, including concern for workplace safety and medical management of injured workers.”<sup>5</sup> They recommended a participatory approach to addressing ergonomic problems, but concluded that for these sorts of programs to succeed company concerns for health and safety must have the same priority as production and cost demands. As we will see with evidence from the Pasco plant, it appears that worker health and safety continues to be a secondary concern for Tyson.

### III. Health and Safety at Tyson: The Official Record

Turning our attention to Tyson’s Pasco plant, what has been the company’s health and safety record over the recent past? **Table 3** offers an initial picture, providing information on the total number of injuries and illnesses reported in the Tyson plant from 1996 to 2003, as reported to OSHA. The number of reported cases averaged 645 over the eight year period, with a low of 520 reported in 2000 and a peak of 820 reported in 2003. Obviously not all injuries and illnesses are of the same severity, and so Table 3 also reports the total number of more serious cases, namely those that resulted in lost worktime such as days away from work or on restricted duty. Tyson’s Pasco plant averaged 496 such cases over the 1996-2003 period, and while lost worktime cases comprised 63.4 percent of all reported cases in 1996, they comprised roughly 82

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<sup>3</sup> Under the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ (BLS) classification system, the number of cases of illnesses includes new cases of problems associated with repeated trauma, such as carpal tunnel syndrome. As such, the illness rate provides a better indication than the combined illness and injury rate of the trends in repetitive motion disorders. One significant limitation of the BLS data, however, is that it only records *new* cases of repeated trauma. Recurring cases are not recorded in subsequent years, which helps explain the declining illness rate observed in reported data since the early 1990s.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the reports by Hale et al. (HETA 88-180-1958) and Kiken et al. (HETA 89-307-2009).

<sup>5</sup> See Gjessing, Schoenborn, and Cohen’s NIOSH 94-124 report.

percent of all cases by 2003. This dramatic shift in the composition of reported injuries and illnesses raises concern over whether the plant became less inclined to report injuries and illnesses over the 1996 to 2003 period. We will explore this issue in more depth with data from our worker survey.

Although meatpacking has always been recognized as a hazardous job, the heightened mechanization and increased pace of work has led to an explosion of repetitive motion disorders. In the OSHA reporting framework carpal tunnel syndrome and other repetitive strain injuries are classified as illnesses, and reported as disorders associated with repeated trauma. We see from Table 3 that at Tyson's Pasco plant these cumulative trauma disorders (CTDs) account for close to half of all reported injury and illness cases in the plant over the 1996 to 2003 period. Note that these reports represent only *new* cases of CTDs, and *do not account* for recurring problems associated with past injuries. As such, these statistics can be taken as clear evidence that Tyson's Pasco plant has a serious problem with CTDs. We will explore some of the root causes of this repetitive strain injury problem when we discuss our worker survey results below.

How does the health and safety record of Tyson's Pasco plant compare with other meatpacking companies in the U.S.? **Table 4** offers us a snapshot of Tyson's performance vis-à-vis national trends for 2002, focusing on only the most serious illnesses and injuries (those resulting in lost worktime). To be consistent with OSHA reporting conventions we estimate the number of cases per 100 full-time equivalent (FTE) employees. At Tyson's Pasco plant the injury and illness rate is 27 cases per 100 FTE employees in 2002. From Table 4 we see that the average for all meatpacking plants in that same year was 10.3 cases, *nearly two thirds lower* than the number of cases reported at Tyson's Pasco plant. Even if we compare Tyson's Pasco plant to only large meatpacking facilities there are stark differences. The average injury and illness rate for meatpacking plants with 1,000 or more employees was 12.2 in 2002, *more than fifty percent below Tyson's rate*.

On a personal level, this means that living in pain is simply a "normal" part of everyday life for many Tyson workers, as the comments of this worker illustrate:

(Translator): He says there are some things that he doesn't do, that the pain bothers him.... He now has to do things more slowly.... One of the things is the way he sleeps at night... he has to sleep a certain way... [On the job] he uses his hands a lot, so that's where his pain is.

(Interviewer): And what is the job you do?

(Translator): Taking the heads off, and then hanging them.

(Interviewer): Have your activities at home been affected at all by your work at IBP [now Tyson]? Is there anything that you don't do now or aren't comfortable doing now that you were okay doing before?

(Translator): He said in the mornings sometimes at home that he can hardly move his hand.

Additional information provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics allows us to make an even more detailed comparison of Tyson's health and safety record with the entire meatpacking industry, particularly meatpacking plants of similar size. One important statistic appears in the first row of **Table 5**, where we see that 75 percent of all large meatpacking plants have a serious illness and injury rate below 17 cases per 100 FTE employees. With a reported rate nearly 60 percent above this threshold, *Tyson's health and safety record is among the worst in the meatpacking industry*. This is a particularly grim conclusion when we consider the fact that in

2002 the meatpacking industry had the highest rate of serious injuries and illnesses in the nation. *This means that Tyson's Pasco plant is not only one of the worst health and safety performers in the meatpacking industry, it is among the most dangerous private sector employers in the United States.*

#### **IV. Health and Safety at Tyson: Independent Evidence**

What explains this poor health and safety record at Tyson's Pasco plant? In order to gain some insight into these issues we pursued a series of both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews of production workers in the plant. We worked closely with local union officials in the design and implementation of these surveys and interviews, querying workers as to their experiences with health and safety issues in the plant. Where relevant, we also asked workers to comment on the proximate causes of the health and safety problems they experienced while working at Tyson, as well as the level of care they received if injured on the job. In total, we received 479 responses to our quantitative survey, and conducted over twenty in-depth qualitative follow-up interviews. We discuss our survey and interview methods in more detail in **Appendix 1**.

With regard to the causes of health and safety problems in Tyson's Pasco plant, workers identified several issues, as reported in **Table 6**. First and foremost, workers were clear that the pace of production, specifically the chain speed in Tyson's plant contributes to injuries in the plant. In total, more than 90 percent of all surveyed workers identified chain speed as a problem. The follow-up interviews indicated that sometimes, workers experience injuries because of the speed of the work they are doing, as in the case of this worker whose fingers had become locked up to the point where he needed an operation:

(Worker): It was the speed of the chain that caused the injury.... And they got to a point where the people simply couldn't bear the speed anymore. And I was telling them that the people were hurting themselves... And they didn't pay any attention to that: that sometimes so many pieces came along, the trays filled up, they were just throwing them at us from up there. So it was even worse than a tortilla factory: mountains of stuff piled up. So you're just pulling and pulling desperately [with a hook], and so that's when you get injured....

(Interviewer): ...How, specifically, did the speed of the chain affect the motion you were making?...

(Worker): The pieces pile up on you... And then, we were lifting some pieces – the legs – we turned them over from one side to the other. They're like sixty, seventy pounds... or more, because it's a whole piece. That's when you get injured even more: your hands and your shoulders, because of the motion you make.

Workers also identified under-staffing as a serious, and related cause of injuries. For example, nearly three quarters reported that they did not have enough people assigned to their work area to do the job. The follow-up interviews suggest that understaffing has an impact both on workers who are left behind to complete jobs that require additional personnel, and on workers who are sent in from other work areas to fill gaps, as these two comments illustrate:

(Interviewer): So, if you were to change something to eliminate the risk of being injured, what would you do?

(Worker): I think, like in the place where I work, they could put another person there to help me. Because in that place where I hurt myself, I went, I mean I talked to the big guy in the company,

and I told them that I had hurt myself and it was their fault. Because the work is for two people. In that area, three people have hurt themselves.

(Worker): A little while ago, I would work in whatever job they put me in. So I knew how to do a lot of jobs. If someone were missing, I would go do that job. So one day I couldn't do it anymore: my hands were really swollen. And then blisters on my fingers broke open and fluid was coming out, because my hands were so swollen. So I told my supervisor. He told me: I'm going to take you to the infirmary." He took me. Then, the nurse said that what I had was the flu! Can you believe it? I knew very well what it was that I had: an injury from doing jobs...that weren't my jobs, and I wasn't accustomed to doing them.

Furthermore, roughly half of all respondents reported that they were forced to work in awkward positions or using awkward motions, while more than a third reported that they did not have the proper equipment needed to do their job. Workers who participated in the follow-up interviews indicated that even when their supervisors know that better equipment is needed, and even when management had said that improvements were forthcoming, the beneficial changes are postponed, sometimes indefinitely:

(Worker): The problem with my hands is that your fingers start to lock up....

(Interviewer): And why has this problem developed?

(Worker):... It's caused by the place where I started to work. We work with very hot water or very cold water....

(Interviewer): What kind of work are you doing?

(Worker): Working on washing the brains.

(Interviewer): What could be done to eliminate or lower this type of problem developing in the workplace?

(Worker): Well, they have... an option [to aerate the tubs]... where bubbles come up and lift the brains so you don't have to grab them in the water with your hands. You just get them wet, I mean you're just pulling the blood off, and you don't have your hands in the tub of water all day long taking them out.

(Interviewer): So will this lower the risk of your getting further injuries?

(Worker): Yes, if they did that, I think so. Or simply, if they could just – like even change the temperature of the water. It's either very hot or very cold for us....

(Interviewer): Okay. But they haven't started doing this yet?

(Worker): No, they said there were just plans, but you know about plans.

Even when workers offer to fix the equipment themselves if provided with the proper parts, equipment improvements can be stalled:

(Translator): He worked for some time in a place where they had to push meat onto a band, but it wasn't working properly, it wasn't smooth enough, so that the meat wasn't sliding onto it well. So he had to push it, and because of that he got shoulder pain, a lot of should pains and upper back problems.... It took about a year for them to finally change it.... He got into arguments with them, you know, until they finally changed it, because they wouldn't listen.... The problem was that the boss didn't want to give him the band to change it, but he said he could have changed it himself, because it wasn't like an electrical thing, he just had to replace a band.... He said he would have done it because that was for his own good too, you know, all he had to do was turn off the machine and change the band, but they just wouldn't give it to him.

While prior research has demonstrated that each of these issues can be a potential source of repetitive strain or other types of injuries, addressing each also has cost implications. As the authors of NIOSH's comprehensive study of ergonomic problems in the meatpacking industry

make clear, however, addressing these health and safety issues will only succeed when they have the same priority within a company as production and cost demands. Given Tyson's poor record, it appears clear that health and safety concerns have not yet been put on equal footing with cutting costs and boosting plant production, and that their workforce has paid the price with their physical health and well-being.

Given the dangerous conditions facing employees at Tyson's Pasco plant, it is important to assess their direct experiences with health and safety inside the plant. In our survey we paid particular attention to the ways in which Tyson handled the reporting and treatment of injuries, both because several union members raised this as an important issue and because starting in 1999 there was a sharp decline in the reporting of less serious injuries and illnesses at Tyson's Pasco plant. The combination of union concern coupled with substantial shifts in the company's reporting patterns prompted us to evaluate what sort of climate existed for reporting injuries and illnesses within the plant, as well as how workers were treated when they did report problems to management.

Several things stand out from this analysis. First, our worker survey suggests that the company's official data substantially understate the health and safety problem inside Tyson's Pasco plant. Among our survey respondents, more than three-quarters (78.7 percent) reported work-related health problems over the previous 12 months, a much higher rate than the company's official figure of 32.7 total injuries and illnesses per 100 FTE employees.<sup>6</sup> Part of the difference stems from the nature of OSHA reporting.<sup>7</sup> However, even if we consider individuals who started work in the survey year, nearly two-thirds report work-related health problems.

Clearly this large discrepancy between our survey results and the company's official figures suggests that there may be other factors at work inside Tyson's Pasco plant which affect the reporting of health and safety problems. From our survey we were able to identify several problem areas, reported in **Table 7**. First, a significant number of individuals do not report work-related health problems to their supervisor. We found that close to 20 percent of our survey respondents did not report the problems they identified in our survey to their supervisor. Second, it appears that supervisors referred workers to the company infirmary somewhat inconsistently. More than 10 percent of work-related health problems identified to supervisors were never referred to the plant infirmary and nearly a quarter were referred more than a day after the problems were reported. One worker we interviewed finally took the risky step of insisting on going to the infirmary without a referral after several months of pain and numbness. But even when the supervisor relented and agreed to make the referral, the worker was pressured to downplay the supervisor's unwillingness to report this clearly serious injury earlier:

(Worker): I hurt one of my hands and I told my supervisor, and I had to keep telling him for about three months. But he would say to me: 'tomorrow; next week.' Or else, it would be because

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<sup>6</sup> Specifically, we asked respondents to report any pain, aching, stiffness, burning, numbness or tingling in some portion of their body over the course of the last year. Note that this is only a subset of the kinds of work-related health problems that should be reported to OSHA. They do not include problems such as severe cuts, broken bones, or severed limbs – all of which have been recorded inside Tyson's Pasco plant over the past several years.

<sup>7</sup> Under OSHA reporting conventions, many injuries are only reported if they are new, and recurring problems are not reported after the first instance. The most prominent example of this is disorders associated with repeated trauma, one of the major problems reported by workers at Tyson's Pasco plant.

someone had gone on vacation, so when they would come back... And so the time passed. Until my hand lost all strength: the knife would get loose in it and I wouldn't even notice. Then, when I could tell that the knife was already loose in my hand, I told him: 'If you don't take me to the infirmary, I'll go by myself.' Then he told me: 'OK, I'll take you on Monday. But first I'll tell you what we're going to say.' Then he told me, 'You're going to tell my supervisor – because first you have to tell that person and then he says if you can go see the nurse or not – then he told me, 'you're going to say that you told me about this on Friday after work.'... Then I said to him, 'I'll say what you want me to say.'

As this worker notes, once injuries go unreported for a certain amount of time, the incentive structure for supervisors make it all the less likely that the injury will ever be reported. But our interviews also suggest that the company takes both the “carrot” and the “stick” approach to minimizing injury reporting:

(Worker): One time I had a burn. I burned these two fingers.

(Interviewer): In what area of the plant?

(Worker): I was in the processing area. I put the knife into the sterilizer. I was really careful, you know. But then I pulled it out on one side and then the water jumped out and burned me. In those days, if we didn't have accidents for a full three months, they gave you a free meal.

(Interviewer): Was that like an incentive for you all not to report accidents?

(Worker): Yes, on every line. Then, well, that time they forced me to go because I reported it later. But I kept working for a while, like maybe fifteen minutes. But I saw that I couldn't work anymore, because my gloves started filling up... my fingers swelled up with blisters. And so they took me to the infirmary. Yeah, they took me finally, because they saw that I couldn't do it. The supervisor got really mad at me, because it was my fault that we didn't get that free meal. And not just because of the meal, but also because they get demerits.... They don't take matters of health and safety seriously. They only take you to the infirmary when they see that you just can't do it anymore and that you're already really hurt.

Although workers by and large report courteous and respectful treatment in the company infirmary, they were nonetheless surprised by the level of care they received. As seen in Table 7, more than 60 percent felt that they did not receive the level of medical attention that their problems warranted. A frequent comment in the follow-up interviews was that company medical personnel typically sent workers out with a handful of Ibuprofen after little serious examination of the worker's body:

(Worker): As soon as my neck started hurting me I went to the infirmary. All they gave me was a fistful of pills and they sent me right back to work... You go there and they don't do anything for you, they just say 'I'm not a doctor and I can't assist you.' All they do there is give you a fistful of pills and a bag of ice, like that.

Among those sent to the infirmary by their supervisors, 59 percent were sent back to work by the infirmary staff, while 21 percent were referred to a doctor. Unfortunately, there was also a significant delay in referring many workers to a doctor, with approximately 40 percent reporting that they were referred weeks or months after they needed to see a doctor. Workers whose injuries ultimately become permanent may well wonder whether this outcome could have been prevented with more prompt physician referrals:

(Worker): I got injured last year and they operated on my hand.... And I still can't, like, recover; even now I haven't recovered the use of my arm....

(Interviewer): How did you injure your hand?

(Worker): Working, I was just working, and then, you know, all of a sudden I felt my hand go like this and I felt it. After that they put me on light duty. Like for a month, and I wanted to go see the doctor, but they didn't let me. Until well after I told them, until I got angry with them and told them it was like after six weeks.

In addition to insufficient (or inconsistent) medical attention, workers also reported serious problems with Tyson's implementation of restricted (light) duty. While assignment to light duty is often required when injuries prevent a worker from performing his or her regular job assignment, more than a third of Tyson workers report that they have experienced problems when on light duty. These problems included higher levels of supervision than normal, verbal harassment by supervisors, unwarranted disciplinary write-ups, or abrupt changes in their shift schedule. Here is one worker's experience of harassment while on light duty:

(Worker): They're very strict when you're on light duty... When you want to go to the bathroom, they won't let you go to the bathroom. You can't go get drinks of water, you can't get ice – you can't do anything without asking for permission so another person can come and take your place first. And when you have to go to the bathroom – I mean, like, in an emergency – and you go, because you just can't put up with it, when you get back they're really mad... They say, "You took, like, forty-five minutes or an hour in the bathroom," when that's not true....

(Interviewer): Why do you think the supervisors treat people this way on light duty?

(Worker): I think it's because they think that if you're on light duty, you're on light duty to not have to do the work.... They're there with a lot of attention; they have a little book and a pencil... You're checking and you're writing down what they told you to write down as the cow goes by, and in that time that you're watching your hands or you're looking over that way or whatever, they're checking on you and they're saying, "Pay attention to the cow. Don't look anywhere else." Or, "How many do you have?" "So, let see, I have twenty." "No, twenty, that's wrong. How come you have twenty and I have twenty-five?" I mean they're just checking up on what you're checking up on just to see if you're working or not.

The unreasonably intense supervision of light duty workers can then lead to the worker being disciplined, with the result that the worker's job becomes jeopardized – simply because he or she got injured:

(Worker): They're already giving you bad looks while you do the work they bring you there, but just go on light duty and they give you bad looks, they're just checking the time, and if you let one little piece of bone slip by you they want to give you a ticket.... And they've given them to me.

There is widespread sentiment among surveyed workers that these difficulties are not coincidental, and that Tyson is using these methods to discourage other workers from requesting light duty assignments when they have been injured. As seen in Table 7 close to two thirds of surveyed workers believe that the company mistreats workers on light duty for this purpose. Workers interviewed used the term "punishment" to describe their view of how the company conceives of, and how workers ultimately experience, light duty:

(Worker): They're always watching you and wanting to give you a ticket. Then they take you to the office [and say]: "You're ready now." Or they put you in other, colder places. For me, they are zones of punishment.... You just can't stand the cold, so you think, better to work all injured than to be here enduring so much cold.

(Worker): You wouldn't like [any of the jobs] on light duty. None of them, because it's like they give you those jobs as a punishment. That's why a lot of people, they say, aw, they'll just put up with the pain. It's better to do that than to be on light duty.

Other workers suggested that this sort of "punishment" effectively functions to discourage injured workers from coming back to work; this relieves the company of some remedial responsibilities:

(Worker): Light duty is hard work. Because they make you go to work where it is really cold. Or work where like there's this conveyor belt going by and you are kind of bent over all day. And, I mean, you get bored and you say, "ah, I'll just go back to work." Or "I'll go home," and you know, you don't go back to work. That is the technique they use.

In sum, the evidence from our worker survey paints an even bleaker health and safety picture than the already grim official statistics. The vast majority of workers at Tyson's Pasco plant routinely face injuries and illnesses on the job. The company, however, appears to have responded with an elaborate system of disincentives for reporting or treating these problems, as evidenced by the fact that nearly one fifth of our survey respondents did not report problems they experienced. Workers also report widespread harassment of individuals on restricted work assignments, and that the company provides inconsistent or insufficient medical treatment to injured workers. As concerns the root causes of the health and safety problems in the plant, workers are nearly unanimous in identifying production speeds as the main problem. There is also substantial agreement that Tyson maintains an insufficient staff to perform the work required, and this contributes to the high rate of injuries in the plant. These issues, along with others identified by workers in our survey are matters within the control of Tyson management. Addressing them would, however, put health and safety in direct conflict with increasing production or reducing costs. Tyson, as yet, appears unwilling to put the health and safety of its workforce on equal footing with its bottom line. As such, its employees have paid for lower production costs with their constant pain and sometimes crippling injuries.

## **V. Conclusion**

At the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the United States was transfixed by Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle*. This book awakened the nation to the perilous working conditions and unsanitary production methods in meatpacking, spurring a host of reform measures which transformed the industry. Nearly a century has passed, and conditions in the meatpacking industry are still a source of shock and scandal. Meatpacking continues to be one of the most dangerous occupations in the country, posting the highest rate of serious illnesses and injuries in the nation in 2002.

Declining beef consumption, industry consolidation, and limited productivity gains from mechanization have created a relentless pressure to lower costs. This cost pressure has translated into a never-ending quest to increase the pace of production and cut staff, leading to the explosion in injuries and illnesses in the industry during the 1980s and 1990s.

When we examine the record of Tyson's Pasco plant, we see the problems of the meatpacking industry at their most extreme. Not only is the plant one of the nation's most dangerous workplaces, evidence from our worker survey indicates that official plant statistics understate the

extent of the problem. Alongside the constant pressure to keep costs down, Tyson has created a series of incentives to keep the reporting of illnesses and injuries to a minimum. From harassment and intimidation of workers on light duty to the insufficient treatment of workers injured on the job, Tyson has traded its worker's health and safety for a stronger bottom line.

We believe that this situation is not irreversible. It does, however, require Tyson to make two important changes to its current operating practices. First the company, at the highest levels, must make worker health and safety a top priority. This issue must become as important to Tyson as production and cost-savings targets, and the company must be willing to make fundamental changes to achieve these goals. Second, the company must redress its deteriorating labor relations inside the plant. As existing research has made abundantly clear, participatory interventions can succeed in reducing health and safety problems in the workplace. However workers must be given a real voice in the design and implementation of improved health and safety systems inside the plant and the company must be willing to adjust production speeds as well as staffing levels in order to address these problems. Only then will Tyson be able to chart a new course, and improve its current health and safety record.

## **Appendix One – Description of Our Surveys and Interviews**

In the spring of 2001 Professor Brenner began working with union officials at Tyson's Pasco plant to design a survey of health and safety, food safety, and humane slaughter conditions in the plant. Brenner designed the survey instrument, in consultation with union officials and staff, and union leaders conducted the survey at the plant between April and December of 2001. Working with employment lists supplied by the union, Brenner selected a random sample of plant employees to be surveyed, and four hundred seventy-nine survey interviews were conducted over the eight month period. Eighty-three of those surveys were from people in the Slaughter Department. This represents 17.3% of the total number of surveys collected. Two-hundred forty-five surveys came from the A-shift in the Processing Department (51.1% of the total) and one hundred fifty-one came from B-shift in the Processing Department (28.6% of the total). We completed surveys from approximately 35% of the workforce in the plant at the time of our survey and we consider these results to be representative of the conditions facing the entire workforce at that time.

To complement the survey data, in the fall of 2002 Professor Apostolidis led a group of Whitman College students in gathering qualitative information about workers' experiences in the Tyson plant. The students interviewed approximately two dozen of the initial survey respondents. This activity was a required component of the Community-Based Learning Project in an upper-level seminar in the Department of Politics, in which all the students were enrolled. The questions were open-ended and geared toward obtaining workers' personal stories about any injuries they had suffered, any medical treatment they had received for such injuries, their experiences on light duty, and their general observations regarding health and safety and food safety at the plant. Each worker was interviewed individually by one or two students; workers were seated in pairs at the interview tables. Interviews were conducted both in English and in Spanish, in the latter case with the assistance of translators. The students then transcribed the interviews word-for-word to supply the material for this report.

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**Table 1 – Concentration of the Meatpacking Industry: 1963-1997**

Year	Number of Cattle Slaughter Plants	Percentage of Beef Shipments from Large Plants (>400 employees)	Percentage of Beef Produced by the Four Largest Firms
1963	1,818	31	26
1967	1,031	29	26
1972	782	32	30
1977	598	37	25
1982	391	51	44
1987	265	58	58
1992	215	72	71

Source: MacDonald et al. (2000), Appendix Table 3.3, Table 3.4, and Table 3.1. Note that the total number of cattle slaughter plants is calculated by MacDonald et al., based on data from the Economic Census. Because the authors exempt very small facilities these totals do not match figures reported in official Census publications.

**Table 2 –Real Wages in the Meatpacking Industry: 1963 to 1997**

Year	Average Wages of Production Workers (in \$2001 dollars)
1963	\$16.94
1967	\$17.81
1972	\$19.12
1977	\$20.03
1982	\$16.63
1987	\$12.90
1992	\$10.81
1997	\$10.43
2001	\$10.45

Source: Authors calculations from the Economic Census, various years. 2001 figures are calculated from the Annual Survey of Manufactures.

**Table 3 – Total Number of Injuries and Illnesses at Tyson’s Pasco Plant**

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Total Cases of Injury and Illness	672	662	611	633	520	636	609	820
Total Cases Involving Lost Worktime (i.e. Days Away from Work or Restricted Duty)	426	401	422	527	447	575	501	669
Lost Worktime Cases as a Percentage of All Cases	63.4%	60.6%	69.1%	83.3%	86.0%	90.4%	82.3%	81.6%
Total Cases Involving Disorders Associated with Repeated Trauma	356	351	235	266	219	319	-	-
Repeated Trauma Cases as a Percentage of All Cases	53.0%	53.0%	38.5%	42.0%	42.1%	50.2%	-	-

Note: Totals for 1996-2001 are based on OSHA 200 logs produced by the company, while data for 2002 and 2003 are based on OSHA 300 logs. In 2002 and 2003 we take all cases involving days away from work and restricted duty to be independent from one another when we construct our total number of recordable cases. This method results in a slight overstatement of the total number of recordable cases in those two years since lost worktime cases can be recorded as both cases involving restricted duty and cases involving days away from work. This procedure does not, however alter our results in any substantive way.

**Table 4 – The Injury and Illness Rate (per 100 employees) at Tyson’s Pasco Plant Compared with the National Meatpacking Industry: 2002**

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Tyson’s Pasco Plant.	27.0
Average for All Meatpacking Plants	10.3
Average for All Large Meatpacking Plants (with 1000 or more employees)	12.2

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Note: This table records the annual rate of nonfatal occupational injury and illnesses involving days away from work, restricted work activity, or job transfer (per 100 employees). Figures for Tyson’s Pasco plant are calculated based on OSHA 300 log reports filed by the plant. National figures are taken from reports at the Bureau of Labor Statistics, available at <http://www.bls.gov/iif/oshwc/osh/os/ostb1249.txt>

**Table 5 - Distribution of Large Meatpacking Plants by Injury and Illness Rate**

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Seventy-five Percent of All Large Meatpacking Plants have an Illness and Injury Rate lower than the following:	17.0
Fifty Percent of All Large Meatpacking Plants have an Illness and Injury Rate lower than the following:	9.6
Twenty-Five Percent of All Large Meatpacking Plants have an Illness and Injury Rate lower than the following:	5.8

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Note: This table records the annual rate of nonfatal occupational injury and illnesses involving days away from work, restricted work activity, or job transfer (per 100 employees) for large meatpacking plants. We define large meatpacking plants as those with 1,000 or more employees. Figures are taken from the Bureau of Labor Statistics: <http://www.bls.gov/iif/oshwc/osh/os/ostb1249.txt>

**Table 6 – Factors Identified by Workers as Contributing to Illnesses and Injuries at Tyson’s Pasco Plant**

Issue	Percentage of Workers Who Identified This Issue as a Problem
The speed of the chain is too fast.	90.0%
The number of people assigned to do the job is inadequate.	73.3%
Workers are required to perform their jobs in awkward positions or using awkward motions.	49.9%
The proper equipment is not provided for the job.	36.3%

Note: These percentages are calculated from the survey of workers conducted at Tyson’s Pasco plant between April and December of 2001. See Appendix 1 for more details.

**Table 7 – Treatment of Health-Related Problems in Tyson’s Pasco Plant  
As Reported by Survey Respondents**

	Percentage of Workers
Experienced a Work-Related Health Problem in the Last 12 Months?	78.7%
Reported This Work-Related Health Problem to Supervisor?	79.2%
Not Referred to Infirmary by Supervisor?	11.7%
Referred to Infirmary by Supervisor More than a Day After the Problem was Reported?	22.7%
Received the Expected Level of Medical Attention in the Infirmary?	40.9%
Sent Back to Work After Visit to Infirmary?	58.4%
Referred to a Doctor After Visit to Infirmary?	20.7%
Referral Was Weeks After You Needed to See a Doctor?	19.2%
Referral Was Months After You Needed to See a Doctor?	19.2%
Experienced a Problem While On Light Duty?	37.0%
Believe the Company Harasses Those on Light Duty to Discourage Others from Going on Light Duty?	64.1%

Note: These percentages are calculated from the relevant subset of workers in our survey conducted at Tyson’s Pasco plant between April and December of 2001. See Appendix 1 for more details.