

Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord.

But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence.

- Jeremiah 22: 15-17



Workplace Justice

THE PORK IS PACKED WITH OPPRESSION:

SMITHFIELD PACKING COMPANY, TAR HEEL, NC

Action. Urge the chairman of Smithfield Foods, Inc., to treat workers with fairness and dignity, and allow them to freely choose whether to form a union. Write to Mr. Joseph Luter, III, Chairman, Smithfield Foods, Inc., 200 Commerce St., Smithfield, VA 23430.

Brief Summary. The Smithfield Packing Company in Tar Heel, North Carolina, is the world's largest hog processing plant. Each day, some 5,500 workers slaughter and cut up over 30,000 hogs. Meatpacking is dirty and dangerous work. But in the Tar Heel plant, Smithfield has made an already difficult work situation much worse. A high risk of injury and mistreatment of injured workers, inflamed racial tensions, and illegal anti-union activities make some workers say: "they're not killing hogs, they're killing people." In 1994 and 1997, workers attempted to vote on whether to form a union in order to address these issues. But both times, the company engaged in widespread and egregious illegal activity to invalidate the vote. The workers need support in their struggle for workplace justice.

Background. Smithfield Foods, Inc., an \$11 billion, multinational company based in Smithfield, Virginia, owns the largest hog packing house in the world. The Smithfield Packing Company in Tar Heel, NC, employs 5,500 workers who butcher some 30,000 hogs a day.



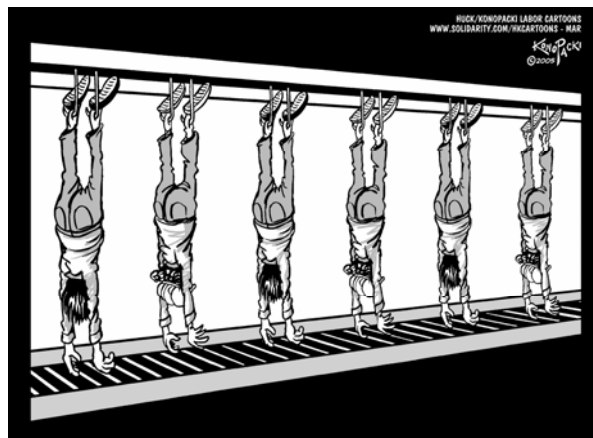
Meatpacking – killing, cutting up, and wrapping meat – is inherently unpleasant and dangerous work. But working in the Smithfield Packing Company plant is especially difficult. The speed of the assembly line drives the pace of the work. Most parts of the plant are either hot (the kill floor) or refrigerated (most of the rest of the plant). Wages are low with starting pay of \$8 to \$9 an hour. A full-time worker takes home \$320-360 a week before taxes or some \$20,000 a year. These are very low wages but, unfortunately, better than in many other jobs in rural North Carolina.

Injuries. Workers face a greater risk of injury in meat packing than in any other manufacturing operation. The prevalence of knives and other dangerous tools, exposure to hazardous chemicals,

risk of repetitive motion and other musculoskeletal disorders, and contact with animals and their bacteria and viruses all combine to make any meat packing plant a very dangerous place. The highly regarded, independent Human Rights Watch calls meat packing “the most dangerous factory job in America.” Reported work-related injuries and illnesses in meat packing plants are twice as common as in other manufacturing facilities, even though the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration believes the meat industry under-reports these incidents.

In the Smithfield Packing Company plant, workers reported 463 injuries in the first seven months of 2006. If this pace continues for the rest of the year, then one in every seven workers will have been injured during the 12-month period.

According to a Human Rights Watch researcher, meatpacking workers are under constant pressure from managers and supervisors not to report injuries. Workers say that Smithfield often denies that their injuries or illnesses are work related. Others say they fear being fired if they file for Workers’ Compensation Insurance coverage when they are injured. (Workers’ Compensation covers 100% of health expenses without co-pays, etc., and pays two-thirds to three-quarters of a worker’s regular wages until he is able to return to work, no matter how long it takes.) In some cases, injured workers are encouraged to use their health insurance and short-term (13-week) disability insurance instead of Workers’ Compensation. This reduces Smithfield’s costs for Workers’ Compensation but if the injured worker is unable to return to full duty at the end of the 13 weeks, he may be fired for being unable to do his job.



According to Human Rights Watch, the meat industry puts “workers at predictable risk of serious physical injury even though the means to avoid such injury are known and feasible. In doing so, they violate the right of workers to a safe place of employment.”

Racism. The workforce in Smithfield’s Tar Heel plant is very diverse: 47% Latino, 38% African American, and 15% Euro- and Native American. Unfortunately, Smithfield actively seeks to inflame racial tensions to keep workers divided. According to workers, African Americans are told Latinos are cheaper and taking “their” jobs, while Latinos are told blacks would replace them if they were deported. According to a former supervisor, the company assigns workers to various jobs in the plant based on race. This was confirmed by an investigative reporter who sought and got a job at the plant: blacks worked on the kill floor, Latinos were on the cut floor, while whites were supervisors.



Workers say the company is intentionally stirring up racial animosity. If workers are divided, it is harder for them to come together to work for their common interests. The United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW) is actively working with employees in the plant to organize a union. Everyone knows the racial tensions must be overcome for a union to be successful.

Immigrant workers make up a sizable share of the Tar Heel workforce. Some may be

The Smithfield logo, featuring the word "Smithfield" in a bold, white, sans-serif font with a registered trademark symbol, set against a black rectangular background.

undocumented and especially vulnerable to an abusive employer.

According to Human Rights Watch, “fully aware of workers’ fear and sure that they will not complain to labor law authorities or testify to back up a claim, employers have little incentive against violating their rights.” This may be one reason Mexican workers in the U.S. are nearly twice as likely to die in the workplace as U.S.-born workers.

Violation of Workers’ Right to Organize a Union. A union could work to bring needed changes in the plant. The right of workers to form or join a union, without retaliation from an employer, is an internationally recognized human right and also guaranteed by U.S. law. However the law is weak and poorly enforced, and penalties for violations are inadequate to bring all employers into compliance. Some employers regularly violate the law.

In 1994 and again in 1997, Smithfield Packing Company workers tried to decide whether to form a union. But the company illegally interfered. The federal National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) found that Smithfield engaged in massive illegal activity during the organizing campaigns and elections:

- assaulted and arrested employees in retaliation for their union activities;
- harassed, intimidated, and coerced employees who supported the union;
- threatened to close the plant if employees voted in the union;
- threatened employees with arrest by federal immigration authorities;
- threatened the use of violence against employees engaged in organizing activities;
- fired, suspended, and disciplined employees because of their support for the union; and
- spied on employees engaged in union activities and asked employees to spy on others.



Even after the federal Appeals Court of Washington, DC, upheld the NLRB ruling, Smithfield

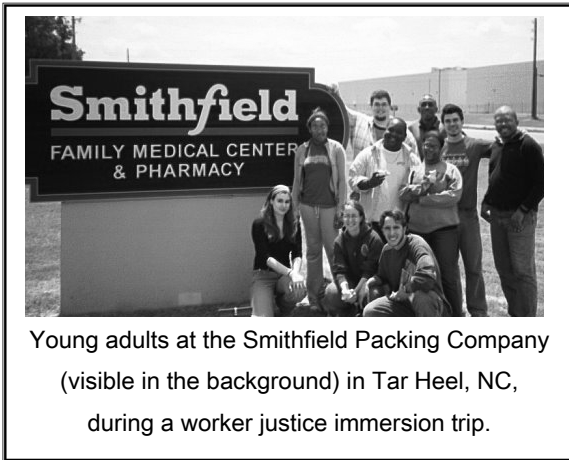


continues to deny wrongdoing.

Take Action. Workers at the Smithfield Packing Company in Tar Heel, NC, need our support. They deserve better treatment at work and they deserve the right to freely decide whether to form a union.

- Send a letter to Smithfield’s chairman Joseph Luter (see the Action paragraph at the beginning of this document).
- Ask your congregation to sign UFCW’s Resolution for Justice at Smithfield at <http://www.smithfieldjustice.com/Documentos/Resolution/Resolution.pdf>.

- Check your local supermarket for meat from Smithfield Packing Company. Learn how to identify meat from Tar Heel (http://www.Smithfieldjustice.com/Be_An_Informed_Consumer.php) and tell the UFCW where the meat is sold (http://www.Smithfieldjustice.com/Documentos/Smithfield_Profile/PDFs/Find_the_Meat.pdf). Remember Smithfield Foods, Inc., is a huge company with many plants, union and non-union. Some plants treat workers with fairness and dignity. Our concern is with the Smithfield Packing Company in Tar Heel, NC, only.
- Hold a “Smithfield-free” Thanksgiving or Christmas party. Serve no pork from the Smithfield



Young adults at the Smithfield Packing Company (visible in the background) in Tar Heel, NC, during a worker justice immersion trip.

Packing Company’s Tar Heel, NC, plant. Ask guests to send notes to Smithfield’s chairman asking for justice for Tar Heel workers (pre-printed postcards are available, see below). Down-load a “party info pack” at <http://www.Smithfieldjustice.com>.

- Organize a group from your church to see the film “Fast Food Nation” (<http://www2.foxsearchlight.com/fastfoodnation/>) to be released in mid-November 2006. Or read Eric Schlosser’s book of the same name on which the movie is based.

- Participate in an “immersion experience” to learn about worker justice. Tour the Smithfield plant and meet with workers and union organizers. Contact Edith Rasell (see below).
- Join with the UCC’s Ministers for Racial, Social and Economic Justice as they organize around the country to support the Smithfield workers in Tar Heel. Contact MRSEJ President Rev. Graylan Hagler at gshagler@verizon.net.



Rev. Graylan Hagler addressing a rally for Smithfield justice in Washington.

Additional Resources

The web site of the United Food and Commercial Workers union has much good information <http://www.smithfieldjustice.com/>.

Human Rights Watch has a number of publications about workers in the meat industry posted on their web site http://www.hrw.org/doc/?t=usa_labor.

A copy of this document with endnotes showing cited sources is posted online at

www.ucc.org/justice/smithfield.htm.

To join the struggle for justice at Smithfield Packing Company or to learn about immersion experiences focused on worker justice, contact Edith Rasell, Minister for Labor Relations & Community Economic Development, Justice and Witness Ministries, UCC: raselle@ucc.org, or 866-822-8224, ext. 3709.