

## **6 Cheap Meat and Cheap Work in the U.S. Poultry Industry: Race, Gender, and Immigration in Corporate Strategies to Shape Labor**

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The global expansion of meat consumption is linked to the industrial production of meat, which relies on cheap inputs like feed grains (Winders 2017), the growth and consolidation of corporate power (see chapter 2), and the liberalization of international markets (Winders et al. 2016). This chapter focuses on another key feature of global meat production: the maintenance of a cheap, global labor force. While the U.S. poultry industry creates trillions of dollars in annual revenues (\$63.9 trillion in 2015) and hundreds of thousands of jobs (281,000 in 2017) (Kay 2018), the industry relies on and must maintain a cheap workforce.

I make several arguments about labor in the U.S. poultry industry. First, the current labor conditions are reflective of and emerge from the historical conditions foundational to the industry. Second, there is a continuity in the reliance on marginalized groups as workers in poultry processing, even if these groups have changed over time. Third, the changes in which groups work in poultry processing are tied to dynamics of corporate practices and state policies. I demonstrate this third point by showing why poultry processing has recently shifted from relying heavily on undocumented immigrant women (Latinas) to reemploying African American women.<sup>1</sup> I conclude with a brief discussion on the need for both local and transnational social movement organizing, as the largest firms, Tyson, JBS, and WH Group, consolidate power and expand operations across national borders, as seen in chapter 2.

### **Global Implications of the U.S. Model**

While this chapter focuses on work and workers within the U.S. poultry industry, its implications are reflective of accumulation strategies employed

by large meatpacking and processing companies around the world. Vertical and horizontal integration methods continue to expand globally as a model for concentrating profits and fueling rising consumer demand (Boyd and Watts 1997; Constance et al. 2013; Patel and Moore 2018; Striffler 2005; Weinberg 2003). The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations predicts that poultry consumption will increase at a rate of 2.3 times between 2010 and 2050, compared to beef and pork consumption, which is expected to increase between 1.4 and 1.8 times over the same period (Weis 2013a). While the United States remains the leader in poultry production globally, production in Brazil, China, Thailand, and Mexico has increased over the last two decades through similar practices of vertical and horizontal integration, consolidation, and reliance on a marginalized workforce (see Hodal 2016).

Raj Patel (2016) argues the current global transformation of meat production and processing follows the trajectory of other forms of industrialized agriculture through the displacement of local and small-scale farmers and butchers. For example, Tyson has expanded global production by opening up processing plants across the global south, currently employing 5,000 workers in processing plants across China and India (Tyson Foods 2018). Through global production, the largest transnational meat corporations also transform local production practices. As recently as 2012, 80 percent of the 10,000 poultry slaughterhouses in China were classified as “artisanal” or “un-mechanized,” but large-scale slaughterhouses are rapidly increasing throughout the country (Gao 2012; see also chapter 4).

Despite the restructuring of Chinese poultry production, the Chinese state has recently placed an “anti-dumping” ban on Brazilian chicken in an effort to protect its domestic production from cheap imports (McDougal 2018). Yet most countries across the global south have less power in protecting local production. Consider the case of South African poultry; since 2015, the U.S. poultry industry has lobbied for favorable terms of trade through the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). Backed by Senators Isakson (R-GA) and Coons (D-DE), the U.S. and South African governments amended AGOA through the Paris Deal in 2015 (Isakson and Coons 2015). This agreement removed South Africa’s anti-dumping tariff and increased the annual quota of U.S. poultry imports to 65,000 tons (Baviera 2018). Since implementation in 2016, South Africa’s poultry industry has lost an estimated 5,000 jobs and is expected to lose a total

of 110,000 jobs across the poultry sector in the coming years (*Africanews* 2017). As Kevin Lovell, president of the South African Poultry Association puts it, “We [South Africa consumers] have become a waste receptacle for the developed world” (Seeth 2017). The “off-cuts,” of less desirable bone-in thighs and drumsticks, are dumped onto the global south creating a “cheap” product for urban consumers at the expense of local production.

While the economic value of corporate meat production has increased nearly sixfold in ten years (from 2004–2014) and is now valued at \$366 billion (McDougal 2018), this global expansion has had devastating effects for the environment, consumers, and workers. With poultry expected to surpass beef and pork globally by 2020 (OECD/FAO 2014), the expansion of the industry requires a growing workforce. We can expect labor practices, following environmental standards, to worsen when moving from the United States to countries and regions with lower wages, less regulation, and a “comparative advantage” in the global “race to the bottom” (McMichael 2017). For example, Cargill recently opened a poultry farm and processing operation in China’s Anhui Province, which is a province known for lower land and labor costs. The plant employs more than four thousand people and processes 225 birds per minute (bpm), which amounts to more than 65 million chickens per year (He 2013). These line speeds are considerably faster than those within the United States, currently capped at 140 bpm, yet provide fodder for industry-led movements within the United States to deregulate line speeds and remove caps altogether.

### **The Poultry Capital of the World**

U.S. poultry production is firmly concentrated in the American South, and Georgia has had greater poultry production than any other state for the last thirty-six consecutive years (UGA CAES 2017). In 2015, this industry employed 29,831 workers in poultry processing alone (Georgia Power 2016). Production across the state has more than tripled since 1978 to meet exponential growth in per capita consumption across the United States and around the world. Yet, it is no coincidence that this self-declared “Poultry Capital of the World” also proudly boasts a “competitive advantage” for manufacturing through extremely low unionization rates (2.7 percent) and the lowest average of all hourly poultry processing wages (\$9.54/hour) (Georgia Power 2016).

The scholarly literature (Gisolfi 2017; Gray 2014; Ribas 2015; Striffler 2005; Stuesse 2016) as well as popular and policy-oriented reports (Compa 2004; Fritzsche 2013; Oxfam America 2016) suggest that the industry employs mostly immigrant and largely undocumented workers from Mexico and Central America. Yet, through the interplay of state and corporate action, poultry processing labor is undergoing another major shift, back to a majority native-born black workforce. This shift reflects a longer history of the industry's dependence on a precarious and racialized workforce, often poorly subsidized through federal and nonprofit social service sectors (see chapter 2). In the following section, I outline the relationship of class struggle to the industry's changing workforce, as corporate strategies and state policies produce cheap labor to facilitate global expansion.

### **Class Struggle and the U.S. Poultry Industry**

The history of the U.S. poultry industry is a history of class struggle. Up until the 1940s, poultry production remained very small scale, localized, and was considered “women’s work” for household consumption and a meager extra income (Gray 2014). Yet, soon after the Great Depression, white landowning farmers and merchants in Northeast Georgia took over the industry and its profits. According to Gisolfi (2017), this takeover was structured along the preexisting crop lien system used in the overproduction of cotton that once dominated the region. Racially discriminatory state interventions under the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) worked together with an agricultural credit system, creating structural barriers to commercial poultry production for black and poor white sharecroppers and tenant farmers.

The AAA programs subsidized cotton planters to idle land and quite literally displace farm labor (Raper [1936] 2005; Gisolfi 2017; Woods 2017). Between 1935 and 1940, the number of tenant farmers in the region dropped by almost 25 percent as planters destroyed cotton crops in exchange for AAA allotment checks (Gisolfi 2017, 13). This newly “freed” population was disciplined to become wage labor for the South’s agrarian economy or for the industrial cities of the North, in turn transforming class structure in the South (Winders 2006). As a result, cotton planters lost considerable political power to the Midwest corn lobby to the ultimate detriment of supply management policy (Winders 2006). As the position of the U.S. cotton industry

weakened, planters were forced to seek alternatives to cotton, creating the conditions for the expansion of the poultry industry. In effect, cash-poor farmers were transformed into “little more than hired hands” (Fite quoted in Weinberg 2003, 10).

While the poultry industry first flourished in the Delmarva peninsula, competition took off in the South due to the “pioneering” work of Gainesville, GA local, Jesse Jewell (NCC 2013) and leaders within the Georgia Cotton Producers Association like D. W. Brooks who turned from raising cotton to poultry (Dimsdale 1970). Jewell bundled baby chicks with feed to farmers. After they grew out the birds, he transported and slaughtered the chickens. The Georgia Cotton Producers Association, later renamed Gold Kist, played a similar role across much of the South, supplying feed, establishing a hatchery, and securing processing facilities. The industry received a major boost in 1944 when the War Food Administration reserved all the chicken produced from seven counties in North Georgia, ensuring a guaranteed buyer (Weinberg 2003). The corporate-state nexus was foundational to the growth of North Georgia’s poultry industry, through a combination of federal loans, purchasing guarantees, and private industry integration. This relationship continues to benefit the largest meat producers (see chapter 2).

Marginalized workers were pivotal to the industrial transformation of the industry. Women came from cotton tenant farming and sharecropping livelihoods “out in the country” of the surrounding counties, considered by Jewell to be “uneducated,” “unskilled,” and desperate for waged work (U.S. House 1951). During Jim Crow, poultry processing was one of the few industries that hired black people. Faye Bush, who started at Georgia Broiler in 1948 at the age of sixteen, describes the relationship of Jim Crow to poultry hiring practices, “Well, it was the first public job that black peoples had to work on, so I thought it was good because I thought I was making some money.”<sup>2</sup> She worked “ruffling” and “picking” chickens for fifteen years.

Gene Masters, a general manager of a plant in Albertville, Alabama, discusses hiring practices in the early days (1959–1964).

**GM:** The plant that I ran was ... we did a[n] extremely poor job of selecting employees. The education level was very, very low. We hired people directly off of the street when we needed them.<sup>3</sup>

Masters's comments suggest that the hiring process then was not vastly different from hiring practices today. Similar "just in time" hiring practices that mirror Masters's "directly off the street" and "when we needed them" practices remain. Prior to legal integration of workplaces, black workers would often only be brought in as scabs, and employers praised them for their "loyalty" and "willingness to do the dirty work which soon became distasteful to foreign women" (quoted in Horowitz 1997, 200–201). The poultry attracted black workers because it provided higher wages and social insurance programs from which they were excluded as agricultural and domestic workers (Glenn 2002; Hunter 1997; Winders 2009; Woods 2017). By the early 1960s, black women had largely displaced white women in Northeast Georgia (Gray 2014).

Large-scale unionization in the South often lagged behind efforts within industrial cities to the north. Yet, at Georgia Broiler in Gainesville, Faye Bush recalls a time in the early 1960s when a group of "mostly black people" walked off the line in protest against the heat. She looks back on the walkout both noting the fear that workers had, but also the deliberateness of the action, which she clarifies for the interviewer.

**FB:** I think it was just the fear of speaking out. Because I think if we could have spoke[n] out more, we could have done more. I think most people was afraid to speak out because of the way they had been all their lives. I remember one time the working condition was so bad, it was so hot in there 'til we found ourselves walking out. But they gave you a certain time to be back on the line. Then you would lose your job. Jobs didn't come by that easy back then. Peoples was afraid.

**CW:** So, are you saying that sometimes you would just walk out just to get some air?

**FB:** No, we called ourselves, "going to have a walk out!" Everybody walked out in order for them to get some air to make it cooler. So they put ice in there and then they gave us a certain time to come back to work.

**CW:** So, you walked out as a protest?

**FB:** Right, right.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, Masters described labor discipline as a major problem in the early 1960s, at a time similar to Bush's walkout. In a plant of 240 workers, where 95 percent were black, Masters recalls workers regularly controlling

their time through absenteeism. This was especially common on Mondays after a weekend of reprieve.

**GM:** Now, there were other problems, but for instance the owner of the company that I worked for told me one time, “I’m tired of all these employees coming in late, drunk and have a bad weekend and show up at noon on Mondays and so on. So, if any group doesn’t show up at a certain time I want you to fire the group.” That was the rule. Of course, when I did that and one of them was a floor lady that we needed the boss changed his mind [laughter]. ... Yeah, we did have serious problem with weekend hangovers.<sup>5</sup>

This practice of weekend-hangover-induced absenteeism mirrors historic patterns of worker resistance documented elsewhere as one in need of direct disciplining (Linebaugh 2003; Thompson 1967). This was a problem of labor discipline that the poultry, in its early days, could not control. While work was dirty and difficult, workers maintained some power vis-à-vis their employers, which increased in the coming decade through organizing by black workers across the South.

### **Black Worker-Led Organizing**

The first documented large-scale poultry strike, which was led by “mostly black women,” took place at Sanderson Farms in Laurel, Mississippi, in February 1979 and lasted until December 1980 (Schwartzman 2013). The strike focused on the pace of work, bathroom breaks, and sexual harassment by male foremen. Workers were “tired of being treated like dogs!” (Brown 1979). ICWU spokesman Bob Kasen explained the union’s efforts as representing a shift in organizing strategy, “We’ve believed for some time that we ought to be functioning with people who get banged around the most—blacks and women” (Brown 1979).

This common knowledge of “getting banged around the most” is evident in workers’ interviews and allowed for the construction of a shared working-class identity that often united workers across race for a time, in opposition to management. Don Mays, a black man who worked “live hang” in several Gainesville plants, commented on this change from the time he started working at the plant in the early 1970s.

**DM:** Okay, like I said, at first there were only a few Vietnamese there, a very few. It was mainly Black and White. And we got along, kind of great I guess,

because of the fact of where we were. Everybody knew that people looked down upon us. ... They are glad you are there, but nobody else wants to do it. It was great coz it was kind of like a band that everybody, we all knew that we worked in poultry places, we knew that, “the undesirables” as we’d call each other, nobody else wanted to associate with us but we were all just one big family.<sup>6</sup>

Importantly, Don Mays distinguishes the “undesirables” from management because they were “gettin’ their money.”<sup>7</sup> In this sense, workers had a shared working-class consciousness.

National unions, like the ICWU, saw the necessity in organizing the South in the midst of deindustrialization and a decrease in real wages for most manufacturing jobs (Smothers 1996; Horowitz 1997). Unlike previous union drives in the South—such as the CIO-led “Operation Dixie” beginning in 1946, which brought in outside organizers and did little to challenge existing racial hierarchies—this labor movement practiced “social movement unionism” that centered on building coalitions with existing nonlabor organizations working for economic and social justice while centering black leadership and civil rights (Fantasia and Voss 2004; Schwartzman 2013; Seidman 1994). The goals of labor organizing expanded to address economic and racial justice head on.

From 1979 to 1995, there were at least eight documented strikes and walkouts in poultry processing plants across the U.S. South (see table 6.1). In North Georgia, there was at least one major walkout during this time period around contract negotiations: “Around 50 disgruntled night-shift employees at [the local] poultry processing plant walked off the job Wednesday at 5:45 p.m. without the support of their union. They vowed not to end the wildcat strike until they are given a \$1-an-hour pay raise, better benefits and improved working conditions” (Ready 1978). Theresa, who was nineteen at the time, participated in the strike. Her mother worked at the plant for twenty-six years, and she started working on the evisceration line right after high school. She recalls the breaking point for a younger group of workers who would not be satisfied with the working conditions of her mother’s generation.

**Theresa:** We got to the point where the conditions got so bad that we actually had a walkout. It was protesting ... I think by us doing that they recognized that, “hey, they had a reason to do that.” You know, everybody



**Table 6.1**

Labor organizing and events across the Southern poultry processing industry

1951	Gainesville, GA	Jesse B. Jewell Inc. uses mob violence against AMC
1972	Forest, MS	60 workers walk off line and form Mississippi Poultry Workers Union
1978	Athens, GA	69 employees terminated for wildcat strike at Gold Kist plant
1978	Durham, NC	Amalgamated local 525 strikes for two months at Gold Kist plant, joined by the Progressive Labor Party
1979	Laurel, MS	211 out of 291 workers strike at Sanderson Farms
1982	Buena Vista, GA	22 black women walk out Buena Vista to join RWDSU
1988	Greensboro, NC	1,000 out of 1,140 wildcat strike at House of Raeford Farms Inc.
1990	Wilkes County, NC	70 drivers at Holy Farms strike and join the Teamsters
1991	Hamlet, NC	Imperial foods fire kills 25, injures 56, out of 245 workers

felt if we did something then, my mother they worked under conditions way worse than I did. Now the women they have equipment, they have it better.<sup>8</sup>

The most vocal leader of the strike was Fred Faust, a knife sharpener who had worked at the plant for four years (Ready 1978). Faust put workers' complaints clearly: "We haven't had a raise in over a year. They just don't respect us. They want everybody to do two jobs" (Ready 1978). These complaints reflected the speedups taking place across the industry. It was over this time period that the poultry industry experienced growth in further processing—so much so, the industry's workforce grew by almost 96 percent between 1972 and 1992 (Schwartzman 2013, 41).

As growing numbers of Southern black women organized, state policies and corporate strategies combined to undermine their efforts. First, the federal government became increasingly anti-union, as seen in President Reagan's response to the PATCO strike in 1981 effectively removing poultry processing workers' most powerful weapon to date, the wildcat strike. Second, the passage of NAFTA during the Clinton administration facilitated corporate relocation strategies that transformed the poultry

industry by opening Mexican markets to U.S. poultry production (Bacon 2012). And third, as labor lost power, the U.S. poultry industry lobbied to weaken federal line speed regulation, increasing production limits from 35 birds per minute (bpm) in 1970 to 91 bpm in 1990 (Albert 1991). These speedups increased the production of cheap processed chicken and by 2000, 90 percent of chicken was sold in pieces (Fink 2003, 12; Patel and Moore 2018; Simon 2017; Striffler 2005). These three seemingly separate events represent class struggle within the poultry industry, which effectively weakened black labor, increased turnover, and opened the door for industry's recruitment of undocumented immigrants. In this sense, labor conflict within the United States laid the foundation for the global expansion of the meat industry, as workers lost power vis-à-vis corporate and state actors.

### **Labor Displacement through the “Hispanic Project”**

Between 1990 and 2010, the “Poultry Capital of the World” saw its Hispanic population increase by 683 percent (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, and Alber 2011, 6; Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce 1990, 16). Georgia tied North Carolina as the top immigrant-receiving state during this time.<sup>9</sup> Both Dalton, Georgia, as “the carpet capital of the world,” and Atlanta, in preparation for the 1996 Olympics, attracted Latina/o immigrants, most notably from Mexico, and Latina/o migrant workers from the U.S. West coast (Odem 2009; Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005). Yet, Latina/o workers were a small part of the poultry industry workforce until the mid-1990s (Kandel and Parrado 2005; Marrow 2011). Yet, by the 2000s, they made up 75 percent (Fink 2003; Griffith 1990; Guthey 2001; Striffler 2005). They did not simply show up, but were actively recruited in the 1990s by the largest corporations in the U.S. poultry industry—Tyson, Pilgrim's, and Gold Kist. I outline this transformation using ethnographic research conducted in and around one of the largest plants in the state. This plant, which will be referred to as “Acme Chicken Processing” (ACP), employs over 1,200 workers, and is owned by one of the top five processors in the world.

Aida, a librarian and local immigrant-rights activist in Northeast Georgia describes how the first immigrants came to work in one of the state's largest plant in the early 1990s:

**Aida:** Yes, we would ask, “How did you come here?” They all said that when they were coming over from their countries, usually through Mexico, there were signs, like in Texas that says “Jeo-rja poultry is looking for employees.” So, they came up, and it took a few to get here and then they would tell their family members, so a lot of people came over.<sup>10</sup>

Across the broader region of Northeast Georgia surrounding ACP, I documented many anecdotal accounts of the plant recruiting workers at the flea markets and Sunday soccer leagues, and even distributing false documents from ACP’s HR (human resources) office. These allegations were confirmed in 2007 when two HR employees won a lawsuit against ACP, for discrimination and wrongful termination. One of ACP’s HR employees was found guilty of making fake Social Security cards for undocumented workers (*Reyna v. ConAgra Foods, Inc.* 2007). Across the South, the largest poultry companies cheapened labor costs by “bringing the third world in,” in turn facilitating the expansion of global production.<sup>11</sup>

On a global scale, neoliberal deregulation of international markets beginning in the 1970s created the conditions for the U.S. poultry industry to grow exponentially. Subsequently, Mexico oriented its agricultural production for export, dispossessing farmers from basic food production. Tyson aided this process in 1989, when the company expanded production to Mexico, partnering with Trasgo and soon after opening Tyson de Mexico. NAFTA only exacerbated this unequal trade relationship, undermining local production and “freeing” Mexican labor to join international migration streams. Companies like Tyson recruited workers with the promise of permanent employment, higher wages, and housing (Fink 2003; Griffith 1990; Mize and Swords 2010).<sup>12</sup>

Black workers witnessed these changes firsthand. Don Mays commented on this process of labor displacement, “the Hispanics, they were just takin’ the jobs that was given.”<sup>13</sup> Mays goes on to note that everyone—not just the new “Hispanic” workers—worked hard at the poultry. He believed that the difference was that these new workers did not complain.

**DM:** They would work hard, just like anybody else. ... And it got to the point where they would work, they did real good, they would never complain, they’d just come in, and did their work and went home. As to where a lot of us would might complain about something we didn’t like, about safety things, the raise, the way we was being treated, the way that inspectors was

acting, or just any little bitty thing. But then, like I said, it seemed like there came a time when you started voicing your opinion about something a couple of, maybe a week or two later, something may come up and you're not there anymore. You weren't replaced with another American, you was replaced with a Hispanic.<sup>14</sup>

The cheapened workforce initially served the poultry industry well, replacing the most outspoken workers. Union membership at ACP dropped from 80 percent to 40 percent (Aued 2007). But as undocumented migrants began settling throughout the South, they not only became rooted with families in their new communities, but also began to expect and fight for their rights as workers and as human beings.

As early as 2006, the union local at ACP collaborated with another community organization, the Economic Justice Coalition (EJC), on a unionization drive at the plant. Linda Lloyd, director of the EJC, recalled the organizing drive: "The idea was to have a big cookout in both the communities, the Black community over at Riverbank and the Hispanic community out in Evergreen."<sup>15</sup> This collaboration paid off as the union local won the election in September 2006. These groups teamed up again a year later for the EJC's annual Labor Day march involving representatives from the local chapter of the NAACP and faith-based community, labor, and immigrant rights organizations. Across the South, coalitions among black and Latina/o workers were gaining strength (Bacon 2012; Stuesse 2016; Zepeda-Millán 2017). Undocumented Latina/o immigrants began making demands for union recognition and labor rights as well as for immigration reform, DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and DAPA (Deferred Action for Parents of Americans), the right to drive, fair housing, health care, and transportation.

Nationally, the largest mass mobilization of undocumented immigrants occurred on May 1, 2006, when hundreds of thousands of immigrants committed to a general strike. This strike hit the poultry industry especially hard. Tyson, Perdue, and Gold Kist were forced to close 22 plants across the South. However, four months later, Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents conducted several workplace raids across the country. ICE is the federal agency used to enforce immigration law. These were the first of a series of raids, which disrupted poultry-processing labor once again.

### The Gendered Racial Removal Program

In April 2008, ICE raided several of the largest plants across the South, arresting four hundred hourly line workers (Associated Press 2008). Pilgrim's Pride released an official statement a few days later emphasizing the company's use of E-Verify<sup>16</sup> and ICE's "Best Hiring Practices," working for the common goal of "eliminating the hiring or employment of unauthorized workers" (Pilgrim's Pride Corporation 2008). These raids constitute what Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2013) call the "gendered racial removal program." First, the raids punish workers for organizing while disciplining the broader undocumented immigrant communities who remain living and working in the United States. Second, the raids provide state-directed labor displacement, forcing plants to find new workers.

The majority of the Latina/o workers left ACP or were fired at the end of 2008 and early 2009, and the plant returned to a majority black workforce. Workers like Alessandra, currently employed through a Temporary Protective Status (TPS) work permit, recalls people leaving every day: "They took them [undocumented workers] to the office and they tell them, 'so we need your birth certificate, and your social. If you don't have those papers with you, please don't come back.' We cry a lot."<sup>17</sup> This personal account was repeated time and time again and was not limited to ACP. Tom Frischitz, a labor attorney, was working in Alabama around this time for the Immigrant Justice branch of the Southern Poverty Law Center. He witnessed a similar practice in 2008 when plants routinely fired batches of workers, 30 to 40 at a time.

**TF:** The workers felt like it was clear the company knew they were employing a large number of undocumented workers, but if they actually verified everyone at once and laid off everyone at once who was undocumented they wouldn't be able to replace them. So, they were intentionally doing it on this rolling basis, so it would give the employer to find workers with authorization to replace undocumented workers in smaller groups.<sup>18</sup>

During this time, workers also left as anti-immigrant laws were passed across the state of Georgia and in other southern states. Senate Bill 350, passed in 2008, greatly limited the movement of undocumented immigrants by making driving without a license more than twice within a five-year period a felony. Activists in Northeast Georgia call this a "D.W.B" (Driving While Brown) and argue that this law increased the rate of racial profiling

outside of their neighborhoods and the public schools.<sup>19</sup> In 2009, many counties across Georgia enrolled in Section 287(g) program of the Immigration and Nationality Act, which partnered local police departments with federal immigration and detention agencies. Georgia notoriously passed House Bill (HB) 87 in 2011, which requires all public and private sector employers with more than 10 employees to use E-Verify to determine their employees' immigration status and requires proof of citizenship to receive any public benefits. Thus, state legislation and industry compliance led to the transformation of poultry processing labor, back to a majority black yet disorganized workforce.

A few undocumented workers returned to ACP after the chaos of the raids and HB 87 died down. These workers rely on fake documents, and often their helmets display a name that is different than their own. They also lose all of their previously earned benefits. If the history of this industry teaches us anything, it is that the firing of undocumented workers and a return to a majority black workforce was a response both to growing visibility, dissent, and organizing among an undocumented immigrant population, *nationwide*, which worked alongside expanding *anti-immigrant legislation* across much of the American South. Yet, most workers who left ACP in 2008 and 2009 just moved to a smaller, less regulated, non-unionized plant about half an hour away. For the few Latina/o immigrants who remained at ACP on temporary work permits or maneuvering other precarious forms of documentation, the work has only become more difficult with faster line speeds, a decimated union, and even higher turnover rates. The risk and fear experienced by undocumented workers who stay in the plants is mirrored throughout their communities as thousands of undocumented immigrants continue to live in the poultry towns that brought them here. These laws increase precarity for undocumented immigrants while doing little to improve the conditions of the native-born working poor who remain.

Today, 80 to 90 percent of the line workers at ACP are native-born black women. While black workers have dominated this workforce in the past, this current generation of workers comes to the plants with severely weakened union representation or none at all. They carry the added fear of displacement either through plant maneuvering to return to undocumented workers or by the looming threat of offshoring. Even as hearsay, these threats kept ACP workers from participating in the kinds of labor struggles

their grandmothers led decades prior. In this sense, labor disorganization produces “third world” labor conditions, even if undocumented workers are no longer employed. The surplus value produced across the American South bolsters industrial poultry expansion throughout the global south. In the next section, I will connect local and global labor struggles through a discussion of changing line speed legislation.

### Local and Global Labor Struggles: The Case of Line Speedups

ACP runs two “sides” of operation: direct slaughter, commonly referred to as the “kill side,” and further processing, or “debone,” for fast food companies like KFC and Zaxby’s. Twelve lines operate on the kill side. From here, much of the work is automated until it reaches the evisceration room. In this room, the sound of the machines is so loud that workers can barely hear the person beside them speak. Birds move on shackles along two main lines, each with six stations. The first worker receiving the bird is the “eviscerator.” Although this position has been largely automated, the machines are never perfect, and it takes time to master. Every motion must be perfected to ensure efficiency (two to three seconds) or the birds will pile up and inspectors will have to stop the line. The actual prescribed process is rarely followed, as workers know they would not be able to keep up. Line speeds, then, shape workers’ experience of the working day from the pace and pain of work, the length of each day, and whether or not workers must give up their weekends to the plant.

Workers generally do not see, but can feel on the line, the underlying ways in which federal agencies and the poultry industry advocate for line speedups, effectively disciplining workers inside the plant. Poultry processing line speeds are regulated by the USDA Food Safety Inspection Services (FSIS). As line speeds increase, the industry effectively creates what Marx calls “surplus value” by stealing time from workers, subsidized through workers’ bodies and federal disability.<sup>20</sup> Don Tyson, in a *New York Times* interview, promoted further processing as “selling time”<sup>21</sup> (Frantz 1994). This “selling” points to an unequal valuation of time and people under capitalism as speedups in poultry processing are relational to changes in consumption and the valuation of workers’ time outside of work.

From 2017 to 2018, poultry processing line speeds were a matter of national concern, yet driven largely by global production pressures. To

briefly summarize, in fall 2017, the National Chicken Council (NCC) petitioned to increase the allowable maximum number of birds slaughtered per minute, from what they call “arbitrary line speed limitations” of 140 to 175 bpm, or preferably removing the cap altogether (Brown 2017). The NCC advocated for an increase in order to “level the playing field” by “eliminat[ing] competitive barriers between the U.S. and international chicken producers” (Brown 2017, 2) and “encourag[ing] more plants to participate in the New Poultry Inspection System” (13). In January 2018, the USDA FSIS denied the petition due to pushback from consumer and worker advocacy organizations (Rottenberg 2018). Opponents of the increase cited a host of studies, governmental and advocacy-led, that connect current line speeds to high rates of injury and illness, particularly carpal tunnel syndrome and other musculoskeletal disorders among poultry processing workers (Barnes and Morris 2016; Fortson and Hawkins 2015; Fritzsche 2013; Musolin et al. 2014; Oxfam America 2016; U.S. GAO 2017).

While this appears to be a victory for workers, taking a longer view of speedups within the industry reveals a troubling picture. Industry advocates and some USDA representatives have pushed for an increase to 175 bpm since as early as 1997 through the HIMP pilot, an acronym within an acronym, which stands for HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points-Based) Inspection Models Project. HIMP granted line speed waivers to 20 plants that allow them to operate at speeds up to 175 bpm (USDA FSIS 2015).<sup>22</sup> Each attempt to increase line speeds has been smartly packaged to improved technology and a more “modernized” scientific approach to biological hazards, food safety, and inspection, while ignoring not only worker safety but also the political struggles of worker organizing.

Thus, (de)regulation of USDA FSIS becomes another instrument used, in Karl Marx’s ([1867] 1992, 261) words, to “shorten the part of the working day in which the worker works for himself,” and “lengthen the other part, the part he gives to the capitalist for nothing.” Not only are workers disciplined by the pace of work, but even after their shift ends, workers’ “free time” is hardly free, spent recuperating for the next day, buying aspirin and gels at the dollar store. Their very lives are sped up, with a majority of workers experiencing “premature disability,”<sup>23</sup> in which they must piece together a living from a monthly disability check. In this sense, FSIS inspection joins a host of federal and industry-instituted policies to aid the exploitation of the poultry processing workforce.



## Conclusion

Counter to popular discourse, for many of the most disenfranchised populations across the American South, “the poultry” provides an essential and even desirable form of “high” low-wage employment. Yet, the conditions of this work within the United States degrade as the industry expands production globally, competing with “cheaper” labor that the United States, in many ways, helped produce. Once, workers could use absenteeism and high turnover rates to gain some autonomy by moving in and out of a variety of low-wage jobs. Poultry plant workers with little control over the labor process would strategically take temporary pay cuts to provide brief reprieve for their bodies and momentary dignity for their souls (Griffith 1993). In the early- to mid-1990s, however, the largest plants used undocumented workers to undermine black worker organizing, and then easily escaped responsibility for these practices. Combined with disappearing social supports and increased policing and criminalization for a population with a historically tenuous relationship with the so-called welfare state, there is less dignity or choice involved in black women’s decision-making to move in and out of this work. Additionally, the “gendered racial removal program” of undocumented immigrant deportation only increases the precarity of undocumented workers because most do not leave, but instead move to less-regulated plants.

The major demographic changes in the poultry processing industry over the past several decades have not simply happened, but are historically and globally shaped by class struggle. Tracing the production of cheap meat, from the perspective of labor, illuminates the ways in which this industry both depends on and maintains precarity for its low-wage workforce with lessons for the expansion of global meat production as state and corporate interests work to disorganize and displace labor. Through this framing, a cheap and constant gendered and racialized workforce is as integral to global meat production as the acres of GMO feed or the selectively bred broilers.

Contemporary struggles over line speeds are inherently global struggles in which worker advocacy groups must contend with National Chicken Council lobbyists’ justifying line speedups by citing the threat of Chinese production. Yet as I have shown, speedups outside of the United States have been shaped by U.S. expansion, consolidation, and “dumping” practices

globally. Therefore, labor movements must act globally, building coalitions not only among native-born and immigrant workers as in the case of the United States, but also with movements of workers in places like South Africa and China who seek control over their working day alongside anti-dumping campaigns for more just terms of global trade and the protection of local production. While the future for workers in this “meatification” appears bleak, labor movements in unlikely places such as the rural and racially and economically segregated South present a historic record of class struggle, one in which workers sometimes win.

### Notes

1. This chapter draws on two years of ethnographic research in Northeast Georgia, between September 2014 and August 2016. I worked in one of the largest plants in the state, referred to in this chapter as “Acme Chicken Processing” (ACP), from November 2014 through April 2015, clocking in over a thousand hours of work on the line. This plant, typical of large poultry processors, employs over 1,200 workers, and is owned by one of the top five producers in the country. It is located in the Northeast region of the state, which has a long history of poultry growing and processing. I also rely on semi-structured, recorded, and transcribed oral histories with fifty-six women workers, as well as interviews with thirty-one community members, self-identified activists, educators, and political leaders connected to the poultry processing workers. Additionally, I draw on worker interviews conducted between 2000 and 2002 by Dr. Carl Weinberg and his students in and around Gainesville, Georgia. I supplement both sets of workers’ accounts with newspaper articles and archival data collected in the poultry science collections at the Russell Special Collections Library at the University of Georgia.
2. Faye Bush, interview by Carl Weinberg, June 11, 2002.
3. Gene Masters, interview by Robyn McClure, April 27, 2000.
4. Bush, interview.
5. Masters, interview.
6. Don Mays, interview by Carl Weinberg, April 20, 2000.
7. Mays, interview.
8. Theresa, interview by the author, March 14, 2016.
9. The Pew Research Center reports that 58 percent of the fastest-growing Hispanic counties between 2000 and 2007 were in the South (Fry 2008).

10. Aida, interview with the author, January 28, 2016.
11. In 2001, six managers at a Tyson poultry plant were indicted with conspiracy to smuggle undocumented workers into the United States and knowingly employ them illegally. Yet, Tyson and three managers were acquitted in 2003 (Day 2003). In 2009, ICE agents raided Pilgrim's Pride plants in Batesville, Arkansas; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Live Oak, Florida; Moorefield, West Virginia; and Mt. Pleasant, Texas and detained 400 employees (Pilgrim's Pride Corporation 2008). The company reached a settlement the following year, agreeing to pay \$4.5 million to a law enforcement fund at the U.S. Department of the Treasury and improve hiring practices. Pilgrim's also released a public statement denying all guilt (Garay 2009).
12. David Bacon (2012) documents a similar transformation in the pork industry through recruitment to Tar Heel, North Carolina, where former Mexican pig farmers became pork processing workers in the Smithfield Plant.
13. Mays 2000.
14. Ibid.
15. Linda Lloyd, interview with author, April 13, 2016.
16. E-verify provides an electronic service that matches worker information to records in the Department of Homeland Security and the Social Security Administration in order to verify employment eligibility.
17. Alessandra, interview with author, January 31, 2016.
18. Tom Frischitz, interview with the author, January 22, 2016.
19. In a recent survey conducted by UGA's Latin American and Caribbean Studies Institute (LACSI), 75 percent of the Latina/o community in the region drive with fear and do not drive more than is necessary (Calva 2016).
20. Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) are both commonly referred to as "disability." SSDI provides long-term disability payments and is tied to having had employment. SSI provides short-term disability for adults and children with limited income and resources. Both require medical records to prove eligibility. Disability is only accessible for those U.S. citizens who persist in the application process. Currently, in Georgia, the average wait time for an SSI or SSD hearing is 16.6 months. The average case-processing time in Georgia is 575 days. The Georgia average for winning a disability hearing is 48 percent (Georgia Office of Disability Adjudication and Review 2018).
21. In 1991, chicken surpassed beef as the most highly consumed animal protein in the United States. This shift was based on Tyson's production model, and by 1995 95 percent of Tyson sales were further processed chicken products rather than the whole broiler (Kleinfield 1984; NCC 2018).

22. Since 2014, HIMP evolved into the New Poultry Inspection System (NPIS) with line speeds capped at 140, yet the twenty pilot plants continue to operate at up to 175.

23. Here, I am drawing on geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2006, 28) work on the political economy of mass incarceration, which she argues depends on an understanding of racism as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."