By Nathaniel Popper  
Postville, Iowa

The animals slaughtered here at the nation’s largest kosher meat packing plant have been the object of nationwide sympathy since an animal rights group released videos from the kill floor in December 2004. But a tour of the mobile homes and cramped apartments just outside town, where AgriProcessors’ immigrant workers live, quickly shifts a visitor’s attention to a more striking concern: the impoverished humans who do the factory’s dirty work.

One of those workers — a woman who agreed to be identified by the pseudonym Juana — came to this rural corner of Iowa a year ago from Guatemala. Since then, she has worked 10-to-12-hour night shifts, six nights a week. Her cutting hand is swollen and deformed, but she has no health insurance to have it checked. She works for wages, starting at $6.25 an hour and stopping at $7, that several industry experts described as the lowest of any slaughterhouse in the nation.

Juana and other employees at AgriProcessors — they total about 800 — told the Forward that they receive virtually no safety training. This is an anomaly in an industry in which the tools are designed to cut and grind through flesh and bones. In just one month last summer, two young men required amputations; workers say there have been others since. The chickens and cattle fly by at a steady clip on metal hooks, and employees said they are berated for not working fast enough. In addition, employees told of being asked to bribe supervisors for better shifts and of being shortchanged on paychecks regularly.

“Being here, you see a lot of injustice,” said Juana, who did not want her real name used because of her precarious immigration status. “But it’s a small town. It’s the only factory here. We have no choice.”

AgriProcessors’ final product — sold under the nationally popular Aaron’s Best brand — is priced significantly higher than standard meat. Its kosher seal gives it a seeming moral imprimatur in an industry known for harsh working conditions. But even in the unhappy world of meatpacking, people with comparative knowledge of AgriProcessors and other plants — including local religious leaders, professors, and union organizers — say that AgriProcessors stands out for its poor treatment of workers.

“I deal with a lot of workers in slaughterhouses,” said Dana Powell, who lived in Postville for four months last fall while unsuccessfully attempting to unionize the plant for the United Food and Commercial Workers. “If I had to rate this one amongst all of them, of the different houses I’ve been to, it’s got to be the worst.”

The manager of the plant, Sholom Rubashkin, said his industry is not a pleasant one for workers, but he denied that the company mistreats its workers, shorts their pay or condones bribery of any sort. Rubashkin, who is the son of the Brooklyn-based owner, pointed to the failure of the union drive as evidence of the workers’ contentment.

He said that AgriProcessors offers health insurance if workers are willing to contribute a sum that is close to $50 a week for family coverage. He has set up an emergency fund for employees in trouble. Describing the hard work his father had done on arriving in America from Europe in 1952, Rubashkin said: “America has always been built by people who are coming to try to better their economic position and are willing to do jobs that other people are not willing to do. That’s how this country is growing.”

Spanish-speaking community leaders in Postville said that last year’s union drive
Workers have a fear of being fired or deported.

One person who saw all this up close was the investigator for the Animal Rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, who shot the notorious video footage of the slaughering process. He said that the cafeteria at AgriProcessors was in a lower class than the carpeted, climate-controlled cafeterias at the nonkosher slaughterhouses where he had worked, while investigating undercover, in Arkansas and North Carolina.

At those nonkosher slaughterhouses, the PETA investigator said, he received significantly more safety training: a minimum of two days, while AgriProcessors only gave him one hour — with a supervisor who did not speak Spanish, and employees who were fired or deported. The investigator said he ended up translating for the other trainees, all of whom were Hispanic. In addition, the PETA investigator — who agreed to speak with the Forward only if he could do so anonymously — said that when workers were injured or sick, supervisors at AgriProcessors showed little concern and were reluctant to provide access to the company’s doctor.

At the other two, they were more compassionate if an individual was hurt,” he said. “At Agri, they’d be more concerned about losing money than the individual.”

Rubashkin said that the company has instituted dual-language training, though he declined to say how long the training is. He also said the company is in the midst of building a new cafeteria for workers.

Workers and their advocates say that many tough out the conditions in Postville because they need the money — often to pay back the smugglers who brought them over the border. No less significant, Postville has no public transportation into or out of town, and few immigrant workers can secure driver’s licenses to escape the isolated community. There used to be a turkey processing plant in Postville, where locals say the conditions were better, but it burned to the ground on Christmas Eve 2003.

One of the workers, a chubby Guatemalan who agreed to go by the pseudonym Manuel, said that he paid a smuggler $4,500 to help him sneak across the Mexican border a year ago. He purchased a Social Security number for $100 in Illinois, and within a few days he had landed a job at AgriProcessors.

Manuel lives in a bare apartment with four other single young men from Guatemala, all of them undocumented immigrants. They have two beat-up couches with cushions that sink to the floor. The carpets are stained and a television sits on the box in which it came. The only decoration is a calendar from Postville’s Mexican restaurant, Sabor Latino, which hangs askew on the window moulding.

On Manuel’s first day, he said, he found himself slicing up chicken carcasses with—

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Manuel and many other workers lost a hand last summer when a finger amputated and worse. One friend said he was so scared and beaten down by the workers who had had fingers amputated and worse. One friend could tell these workers wanted help but refused to speak up. Powell, the union organizer, said, “You hear frequently. When supervisors are up three or four hours short regularly, a $6.25. But Manuel and many other workers are not paid $7.25 an hour, having moved up from AgriProcessors’ workers. Manuel makes holidays, when the plant closes and the holidays, except Christmas. A more practical problem, however, arises on Jewish holidays, when the plant closes and the workers are not paid.

Pay is a recurring complaint from AgriProcessors’ workers. Manuel makes $7.25 an hour, having moved up from $6.25. But Manuel and many other workers said that their weekly paychecks come up three or four hours short regularly, a claim that the union organizers reported hearing frequently. When supervisors are alerted, they promise to correct things but rarely do, workers and union officials said.

“They are being taken advantage of,” said Powell, the union organizer. “You could tell these workers wanted help but they were so scared and beat down by this company.”

But Manuel said he counts himself lucky when he sees the workers who have had fingers amputated and worse. One friend of his lost a hand last summer when a machine he was cleaning suddenly whirred to life. Manuel and many other workers said that the young man is now back at the plant, working half time and still hoping to collect enough to pay off his debts back home.

The fascination with the unseen world of slaughterhouses is long standing, extending from Upton Sinclair’s “The Jungle” a century ago to a Human Rights Watch report last year. That study found that the industry has the highest levels of injury of any manufacturing industry, and said the workers “contend with treatment and conditions that violate their human rights.”

Kosher plants occupy a small, seldom scrutinized corner of the overall meat market. In the chicken industry, kosher companies slaughter less than 1% of the 33 million birds killed each day. There are five kosher poultry slaughterhouses in America besides AgriProcessors, according to industry experts. But Empire Kosher, in northern Pennsylvania, is AgriProcessors’ only major competitor.

Kosher beef is mostly supplied by firms that send rabbis into nonkosher slaughterhouses to kill selected animals. Hebrew National, the biggest national brand of kosher beef, does not produce the glatt kosher standard now demanded by most Orthodox Jews.

Because of market size, kosher plants have escaped the scrutiny of labor conditions that the larger industry has received. A number of experts in the area, including the author of the Human Rights Watch report, said they had assumed that conditions were better in kosher slaughterhouses because they operate in a premium market under the supervision of clergymen.

“My totally unexamined assumption was that good Orthodox Jews would probably have a different ethos for treatment of their workers,” said Gouveia, the Nebraska professor.

Empire Kosher has had its own troubles in the past. In 2001, immigration officials raided the plant and arrested 135 undocumented immigrants, according to news reports.

In the kosher certification process, working conditions are not a factor, according to the largest certifying agency, the Orthodox Union. But at AgriProcessors’ biggest competitors, Empire and Hebrew National, there is a union regulating wages and grievances.

When it comes to outside regulatory agencies, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration have tagged AgriProcessors this year with six violations. That amounts to more than half the violations in all Iowa meatpacking plants during that time, according to OSHA statistics.

The outside agency that Postville community leaders most remember is the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which came to town in 2003. The agency would not comment on the incident, but Rubashkin acknowledged that it was responding to complaints that a supervisor in the chicken department was demanding bribes from workers.

Community leaders say that Hispanic workers were too afraid to speak with the EEOC. The supervisor remains at the plant today, and union officials and workers said that while he no longer demands outright bribes, he now tells workers to buy a car from him if they want a better shift or have a relative hired.

Rubashkin said the charges were completely unfounded. “Him buying a car or selling a car has nothing to do with hiring,” Rubashkin said of the supervisor in question.

Another outside agency that sought to intervene was the United Food and Commercial Workers, the union that represents Empire Kosher workers. Two union organizers arrived in Postville last July. One of them, Powell, said the campaign began to unravel at about the same time workers in the plant told him that supervisors were having meetings at which they threatened to fire workers or refer them to immigration officials if a union was formed.

Rubashkin denied that there was any intimidation. “We explained to people what a union does — how they get in power and do what they want,” he said.

In the end, the union could not even find a space in town to hold an organizing meeting. One was scheduled in the Catholic church, but the church leadership was pressured to cancel it, according to numerous people close to the situation.

Mark Grey, a professor at a local university who studies immigrant labor at slaughterhouses, said that even after five years of coming to talk with workers at AgriProcessors, he is still caught off-guard by the severity with which workers are treated.

“I’m continually surprised at how poorly they treat these people because they’re not Jews and because they happen to be immigrants,” said Grey, director of the Iowa Center for Immigrant Leadership and Integration. The center is based at the University of Northern Iowa, in Cedar Falls.

“The bottom line here is that I’m not sure these devout Jews are using Jewish ethics to treat their workers,” he added.