

# FORWARD

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## In Iowa Meat Plant, Kosher 'Jungle' Breeds Fear, Injury, Short Pay

'I'm not sure these devout Jews are using Jewish ethics to treat their workers'

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



NATHANIEL POPPER

**Factory Town:** AgriProcessors in Postville, Iowa, is the only kosher slaughterhouse in the country that produces both beef and poultry.

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

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failed for the same reason that grievances have not been made public before: The workers have a well-developed fear of being fired or deported. Many of the workers are undocumented immigrants, according to numerous workers, community leaders and the local priest.

"If you're not treated well at work, you tend to keep your mouth shut and go deeper until it becomes, well, unbearable," said Father Floyd Paul Ouderkirk, Postville's Roman Catholic priest. Ouderkirk previously had ministered in other Iowa and Texas slaughterhouse towns. In those other plants, Ouderkirk said, the workers had been less afraid to speak up and had labored in more tolerable conditions.

In a small town like Postville, where AgriProcessors is the largest economic engine, workers have few places to turn beyond the three churches. Ouderkirk retired from his full-time position two years ago. He has not been replaced, but he returns to Postville regularly to celebrate Mass in Spanish — and to hear complaints.

"They leave so much to be desired in the moral and ethical treatment of workers," Ouderkirk said of AgriProcessors.

The company's business model has been economically successful. AgriProcessors is the only kosher slaughterhouse in America producing both beef and poultry. While AgriProcessors has been expanding steadily, its closest competitor in the poultry industry, Empire Kosher, recently fired employees and cut back operations. Union leaders at Empire Kosher said that the cutbacks were necessary because Empire pays its lowest-ranking unionized employees close to \$3 more an hour from the outset than AgriProcessors' lowest employees, and provides full benefits.

Even among nonunion plants, experts say AgriProcessors' salaries are low.

"I have not heard of a six-dollar wage since I started working in Nebraska in 1990," said Lourdes Gouveia, director of the Office of Latino Studies at the University of Nebraska, where she studies working conditions in the meat packing industry.

Not all the workers at AgriProcessors who spoke with the Forward hated their jobs. Workers in the maintenance department, where more locals and non-Hispanic immigrants are concentrated, start at \$9 an hour. In the more plentiful menial positions, a handful of employees said that with a good supervisor, work at the plant was tolerable. One supervisor on the beef side, a Postville local, recently married a Hispanic worker and is known as a friend of the entry-level employees. But workers said that there were few standards and little transparency at the plant.

The owner of AgriProcessors, Sholom's father, Aaron Rubashkin, has had trouble with workers' rights before. In 1995, the National Labor Relations Board found that he had violated labor laws at his textile mill in New Jersey. For months on end, the

mill had taken dues from the paychecks of union employees without handing them over to the union — and had a "proclivity for violating" the labor law, according to the NLRB judge.

The Rubashkins first set up shop in Postville in 1987, buying a defunct nonkosher plant. The town drew national attention in 2000 when journalist Stephen Bloom published his book, "Postville," describing the culture clash that resulted when a group of Lubavitch Hasidim moved into a farming town of 1,500. At the time, the hardest labor at the plant was performed by Eastern European immigrants. Some complained to Bloom about working conditions.

But when Bloom was in town, workers willing to do AgriProcessors' menial work were at a premium, and the Rubashkins would fly in workers from New York. That changed as the Eastern Europeans were replaced by a flood of Hispanic immigrants, who required little in the way of recruitment by the Rubashkins. Today, more than half of Postville's 2,500 residents are Hispanic, according to most estimates. Indeed, there is a widespread sense, as one 26-year-old man from Mexico said, that "there is somebody outside waiting to take your job — so you just keep working, or else."

The Hispanic immigrant workers are also less educated than the Eastern Europeans, and several people who have dealt with both groups claimed that plant management has given the newcomers less respect.

"They feel like they're not only treated unfairly, but treated as lesser beings — as second-class citizens," said Caitlin Didier,

## Workers have a fear of being fired or deported.

who lived in Postville for nine months in 2004 and interviewed more than 50 Hispanic workers for her dissertation at the University of Kansas on ethnic cooperation in Postville.

A picture of the conditions at AgriProcessors emerged during a tour of the plant. It is a modern facility with clean metallic walls and concrete floors; as is typical in slaughterhouses, most of the rooms are cold and scattered with stray bits of animal flesh.

In the room where chickens are killed, a few rabbis stand at the back, administering the lethal cut. The bulk of the work is done by rows of Hispanic men and women who grab the chickens by their feet and prepare them for death. While the rabbis have their own bathrooms and well-lit cafeterias, which Rubashkin pointed out on a tour, he declined to show the Forward the separate facilities for the workers, which

were described to the paper as damp and dirty.

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 slaughtering 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 has 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. 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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out even receiving the hour-long orientation that other workers had described.

"There's no training," he said. "You learn by getting chewed out."

Now, Manuel arrives each day at 4:45 a.m. Although the Supreme Court decided last year that meatpacking plants must pay their workers for donning and doffing — dressing and undressing before and after work — Manuel and the union organizers who lived in Postville said that the workers are not allowed to punch in until they take their positions on the line. Rubashkin responded by saying that the company did change the rules when the Supreme Court ruling came down.

Manuel works 10-hour days in the chicken department. Lunch breaks are 30 minutes, but after taking on and off the bloody smocks and masks at the beginning and end, there is closer to 15 minutes' time left for eating. Dozens of workers on a shift share the cafeteria, and the workers say there are only three microwaves, which short-circuit when used simultaneously.

"I've said, 'Why do you treat us like this?'" Manuel said. "We're human beings, not animals."

Manuel came from a religious family in Guatemala, but he rarely has time for observance. AgriProcessors does not slow down for Sundays or for any Christian 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, accord-

ing 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.