

STRONG UNIONS, STRONG WORKERS:

Increasing Worker Power in Iowa's Meatpacking Industry

POLICY BRIEF BY MADISON BLACK
JULY 2022



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Madison Black graduated with highest distinction from the University of Iowa in May 2022 with a BA in political science. She is passionate about immigration policy and hopes to do more research at the intersection of immigration and labor law in the future. Madison has also done research on contraceptive deserts in Iowa and the use of the u-visa to protect immigrants in the meatpacking industry. She will start her second year in the Master of Public Affairs program at the University of Iowa this fall.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Alyssa Beauchamp for her help and support on this project. Thanks also to Alí Bustamante, Joe Miller, and Sonya Gurwitt for their time and feedback on my numerous drafts. Finally, thank you to Mason Koelm, Vane Pérez, Emily Miranda, and Laura Widman for their support and for introducing me to the Roosevelt Network!

ABOUT THE EMERGING FELLOWS PROGRAM

The Emerging Fellowship is an academic-year-long opportunity in which undergraduate students engage in deep research and writing skills training—concluding with the publication of a policy recommendation brief. This remote, part-time fellowship is Roosevelt Network’s most advanced policy and research opportunity, similar to the experience of an upper level “seminar” or “independent study” college course. Emerging Fellows sharpen their policy writing and research skills with the support of a team of Network staff, Alumni, and Roosevelt Institute fellows.



ABOUT THE ROOSEVELT NETWORK

A program of the Roosevelt Institute, **The Roosevelt Network** develops and supports undergraduate college students and early career professionals—particularly those who hold identities that have historically been denied political power—to be the next generation of leaders in the progressive policy ecosystem.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 Executive Summary**
- 2 Issues with Today's Meatpacking Industry**
- 6 A Brief History of the Meatpacking Industry**
- 7 The Meatpacking Industry Today**
- 8 Union Presence in Iowa**
- 9 How Can We Protect Meatpackers Today?**
- 10 Rebuilding Worker Power in Iowa**
- 12 Conclusion**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although meatpacking is one of Iowa's largest industries—employing over 26,000 people statewide (Stuesse and Dollar 2020)—the corporations that make up the industry have consistently failed to protect their workers. The industry has made the news as a result of its mistreatment of employees several times throughout the past few decades, and most recently for its insufficient COVID-19 mitigation processes, which led to high infection rates among employees and several deaths (Tyson Food Managers 2020; Des Moines Register Staff 2021; Jett 2021). This policy brief explores the history and current state of Iowa's meatpacking industry through examination of demographics, industry working conditions, union activity, and the effects of industry dynamics on local communities. Through analyzing existing legislation and past attempts at reform, this brief provides a clear policy recommendation: Iowa legislators should repeal the state's right-to-work law. This would increase the size and strength of unions, which would allow workers to negotiate for improvements like safer working conditions and higher wages. Iowa's meatpackers have successfully banded together to challenge employers and win gains in the past, and with legislators' support, they can achieve a safer and more prosperous future.



ISSUES WITH TODAY'S MEATPACKING INDUSTRY

Iowa made national news during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic when reports emerged that insufficient safety precautions had led to many of its meatpacking plants becoming epicenters of viral outbreaks. Managers at one Tyson plant in Iowa even placed bets on which workers would catch the new disease (Tyson Food Managers 2020). Data published by the US House of Representatives in October of 2021 show that at least 59,000 employees in the meatpacking industry were infected with COVID-19 nationwide, and 269 of these workers died as a result of the disease (Des Moines Register Staff 2021; AP News 2021). Data show that Latinx workers were the hardest hit, making up 44 percent of cases (Jett 2021). In 2020, the CDC published a report stating that 87 percent of meatpacking employees infected with the virus were racial or ethnic minorities (Waltenburg et al. 2020). Iowa declined to participate in this study, as the state's Department of Public Health claimed it could not provide the requested data before the CDC's deadline (Des Moines Register Staff 2020). This raises questions as to why these figures were not already available; as one of the leading states in the meatpacking industry, Iowa's data would have given policymakers a much clearer picture of COVID-19's impact on the industry.

The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that as of May 2020, Iowa had the third-highest employment level in meat processing workers and the highest concentration of meat processing jobs in the United States (BLS 2022). The industry makes up a large portion of the state's economy and an even larger portion of the economies of the towns in which meatpacking plants operate.

The meatpacking industry is exceedingly hazardous for workers. Even prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, meatpackers navigated inhumane working conditions that prioritized profits over worker safety. Plant owners frequently increase line speeds and deny bathroom breaks. Workers must use sharp cutting utensils and navigate slippery floors in small, cramped working spaces. Though the industry already faces a high injury rate, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) reports that many more incidents likely go unreported (Gerr 2021).

“Even prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, meatpackers navigated inhumane working conditions that prioritized profits over worker safety.”

Meatpacking communities have also suffered disproportionately from pandemic. Saitone et al. (2021) find that the presence of a meatpacking plant within a county was correlated with a 110 percent increase in per capita COVID-19 infection rates following the initial emergence of the disease.

Given how dangerous meatpacking jobs are, protections must be put in place to ensure the safety of employees. This is especially important because Iowa's meatpacking industry overwhelmingly employs those who hold less political and economic power in American society: documented and undocumented immigrants, refugees, Black and Latinx workers, and even children. Nationally, 81 percent of those who handle, cut, and process meat are non-white, and over half of all workers in the industry are foreign-born (Fremstad et al. 2021).

Meatpacking workers produce a large portion of the foods eaten in the United States, and their jobs are vital to future food supply chains domestically and globally. But the industry is plagued by a complex puzzle of problems regarding immigration, worker protections, and employer accountability, and many of its workers are already vulnerable due to race, economic barriers, or immigration status. This policy brief proposes a set of reforms to the meatpacking industry and Iowa's labor laws that will bring much needed improvements to working conditions and quality of life for its employees.

It begins with a brief history of the meatpacking industry's growth in Iowa, then discusses the meatpacking industry in Iowa today, including the demographics of the workforce, the impact that plants have on their communities, the living and working conditions of meatpacking employees, and the role of unions within the industry.

Rooted in an analysis of the history and necessity of unions in the meatpacking industry, this brief recommends the repeal of Iowa's right-to-work legislation and the strengthening of unions within the meatpacking industry. Iowa's right-to-work law places restrictions on unions, including prohibiting unions from collecting dues from all employees covered under the union contract, which reduces overall union membership, resources, and strength (Stromquist 1993). These recommendations aim to empower meatpacking workers in Iowa to fight to make their workplaces safer and more equitable, through changes such as capping line speeds and increasing wages across the sector. These changes represent the first steps toward eradicating the current system of exploitation in the industry and ensuring that meatpackers can earn a living wage in a safe and healthy work environment.

“...the presence of a meatpacking plant within a county was correlated with a 110 percent increase in per capita COVID-19 infection rates following the initial emergence of the disease.”

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MEATPACKING INDUSTRY

During the 19th century, meatpacking plants were mainly located in large cities. From its inception, the meatpacking industry has been characterized by harsh working conditions and a largely immigrant workforce. In 1906, writer and activist Upton Sinclair published *The Jungle*, a novel intended to shed light on the conditions in meatpacking plants. While the book caught the public's eye, readers were more concerned with the safety of their food than the safety of the employees preparing it (Francis 2020). Today, over a century after the book was first published, the meatpacking industry is still exploiting and abusing its vulnerable workforce.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the meatpacking industry slowly began to migrate into more rural areas, in part to escape the strong unions in place at the city plants at that time (Warren 2000). Meatpacking facilities began to appear in small Iowa towns such as Ottumwa, Storm Lake, West Liberty, and Postville, operated by a mix of large businesses and smaller local packing plants, such as the John Morrell and Company plant in Ottumwa (Warren 2000).

During the second half of the 20th century, larger meatpacking corporations began to buy out these smaller plants, decreasing competition in the sector. For example, Smithfield, one of the major meatpacking corporations, went through a rapid and expansive acquisition of smaller meatpacking companies and plants between the 1970's and '80s. These acquisitions included the John Morrell and Company plant in Ottumwa, which Smithfield rebranded in an effort to consolidate economic power and dominate the market (Warren 2000). *The American Prospect* reports that the top four pork processing companies went from controlling about one-third of the industry in the 1970s to controlling over 70 percent today. Smithfield, for example, went from being the seventh- to the first-largest pork producer in only three years (Knox 2020).

These conglomerates have established monopolies that reduce workers' bargaining power. Large corporations such as Smithfield also use their resources and power to influence politicians to support policies that make it easier to suppress worker power. For example, Tyson, a major meatpacking corporation, maintains a close relationship

“From its inception, the meatpacking industry has been characterized by harsh working conditions and a largely immigrant workforce.”

with Iowa Select Farms, Iowa's largest hog operation (Mitchell and Frerick 2021). The owners of Iowa Select Farms, Deb and Jeff Hansen, are major donors to Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds, whose administration helped ensure that Iowan meatpacking plants remained open during the COVID-19 pandemic (Associated Press 2021). During this period of consolidation, the number of meatpacking workers covered by union contracts declined drastically—from around 90 percent in the 1950s to only 18 percent in 2020 (Chang et al. 2021).

In 1967, Iowa Beef Packers introduced “boxed beef.” The product resulted in many plants forming a disassembly line, in which workers stood shoulder-to-shoulder, making identical cuts to each carcass, which moved along the line at increasingly high speeds (Yeung and Grabell 2020). The close quarters and increasing speed of production made an already dangerous job even more so by increasing the risk of accidental knife injuries made by workers desperately trying to keep up with the required pace.

The meatpacking industry still plagued by unsafe and inhumane working conditions, and there is still work to be done to improve the circumstances of meatpacking workers. The following section discusses the current state of the meatpacking industry, focusing on Iowa.

THE MEATPACKING INDUSTRY TODAY

Much of the meat processing industry today is dominated by a select number of corporations. The White House reports that four conglomerates—Tyson, JBS, Marfrig, and Seaboard—control between 55 and 85 percent of the pork, beef, and poultry markets in the US (Deese, Fazili, and Ramamurti 2021). In response to the industry's consolidation, the Biden administration has committed to “take bold action to enforce the antitrust laws, boost competition in meat processing, and push back on pandemic profiteering” (Deese, Fazili, and Ramamurti 2021).

“...meatpacking plant owners purposefully hire vulnerable groups, specifically immigrants, to increase employer control and reduce employees' ability to collectively bargain.”

Several studies have shown that the meatpacking industry's history of exploiting its workforce continues today. Champlin and Hake (2006) argue that meatpacking plant owners purposefully hire vulnerable groups, specifically immigrants, to increase employer control and reduce employees' ability to collectively bargain. Human Rights

Watch sums up the situation: “Instead of exporting production to developing countries for low labor costs; lax health, safety and environmental enforcement; and vulnerable, exploited workers, US meat and poultry companies essentially are reproducing developing country employment conditions here” (Human Rights Watch 2004).

In extreme cases of this practice, plant owners have been found to be exploiting children and people with mental disabilities. In 2008, for example, it was found that an Agriprocessors plant in Postville, Iowa was employing 32 underaged workers (Ludden 2008). In another instance, an Iowa meatpacking plant conspired with a Texas work placement company for several decades to illegally pay poverty wages to a group of men with intellectual disabilities. These men retired with no savings after spending their lives working for the meatpacking plant (Barry 2014).

Racial and ethnic minorities make up a large part of the meatpacking workforce in the United States. Latinx individuals make up the largest portion of the workforce, at 34.9 percent, while 21.9 percent are Black and 6.8 percent identify as Asian American and/or Pacific Islander (AAPI). White individuals make up 34.5 percent (Stuesse and Dollar 2020). Over a third of the workforce—37.5 percent—is foreign-born, with most originating from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Burma (Myanmar), and Cuba (Stuesse and Dollar 2020).

A wide variety of languages are spoken among foreign-born meatpacking employees. Nationally, 65 percent of meatpacking workers speak Spanish, while only 5 percent of foreign-born meatpacking workers speak English at home. Among the other 30 percent of foreign-born employees, no language is spoken by more than 2.5 percent (Stuesse and Dollar 2020). In a workplace where so many languages are spoken, it is important—though complicated—to ensure that safety materials, policies, and other necessary workplace information is made easily accessible for each worker, regardless of their native language.

These data illustrate a persistent industry trend of hiring those with less political or economic power in comparison to white, English-speaking, US-born peers. The diversity of the meatpacking industry makes organization and communication more difficult, especially due to language barriers. It also makes it easier for meatpacking companies to exploit their workers, especially those who are immigrants.

National immigration policy has contributed to the problem of meatpacking companies being able to exploit immigrant workers by hindering undocumented immigrants' ability to advocate for fair treatment. With the constant risk of detention and deportation, immigrant employees are forced to choose between standing up for their rights in the workplace and remaining in the country undetected. Meatpacking plants are common targets of Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids; a 2008 raid on the Agriprocessors plant in Postville, IA was the largest single-site raid in United



States history, resulting in 389 arrests (Crowder and Elmer 20). While undocumented immigrant employees face risk of arrest or deportation, employers continue to employ these populations with few penalties.

Gerr (2021) argues that meatpacking employees can be considered part of the “precarious” workforce. The term “precarious employment” describes conditions in which employees are less able to use individual or collective power to improve workplace safety and health relative to standard employment. Precarious employment is characterized by insecurity resulting from inadequate wages, lack of protections against employers, the inability of employees to exercise rights, and a lack of the benefits and regulations found in standard employment practices (Gerr 2021). Meatpacking employees in Iowa face especially precarious conditions because Iowa is an “at-will” state, meaning that employers in Iowa can fire their employees for any reason—or for no reason at all.

Employees at meatpacking plants are acutely aware of their lack of power. Across several reports, Ramos et al. find that meatpacking employees believe that although their health suffers from working in the plants, they do not have the power to improve it (Ramos et al. 2021a); that they lack the proper resources, energy, and time to prioritize their health and did not trust the company health office; and that they felt that their employers “cared more about production than people” (Ramos et al. 2021b). These studies show that meatpacking workers are less able to use their power to improve workplace safety and health.

The practices of meatpacking plants can negatively impact members of the local community, causing them to harbor negative feelings toward both the plant and its employees. Artz et al. (2010) offer insight into some common fears of communities that are deciding whether to build a meatpacking plant and whether these fears are valid. Residents’ fears included changing community demographics, a decrease in the number of English speakers, and increased burdens on local schools and public assistance programs. The study found that meatpacking plants do indeed increase burdens on local schools and increase the local poverty rate—but the authors placed the blame for this outcome on the meatpacking employees themselves, rather than the employers who pay them poverty wages.

The meatpacking industry has faced, and continues to face, many problems involving worker health and safety that have resulted from the corporatization of the industry and its leaders’ anti-union stance. In the mid 20th century, workers in the industry formed strong unions to advocate for improved working conditions and increased wages. The following section will look at the history of unions in Iowa, as well as at union presence in Iowa and in the meatpacking industry today.



UNION PRESENCE IN IOWA

Unionism in Iowa was born in the coal mining industry, when the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) became the strongest union in the state during the state's first labor movement at the end of the 19th century (Stromquist 1993). Like meatpacking, coal mining was dangerous work in which workers had to organize to fight for basic health and safety protections. When Iowa coal mines began to close in the early 20th century, many workers transitioned to jobs in the meatpacking industry (Stromquist 1993). These employees' experience with—and appreciation for—strong unions played an essential role in the unionization of meatpacking plants.

Unions' power ebbed and flowed in the first few decades of the 20th century, but solidified under the New Deal, in particular when the National Labor Relations Act passed in 1935 (NLRB 2022). During the subsequent era of increased worker protections and power, meatpacking unions—such as the United Packinghouse Workers of America—pushed plant owners to institute new safety and equity policies, such as slowing line speeds, integrating the workplace, capping work hours without penalties to workers, and expanding hiring to women for roles historically restricted to men.

Some unions also took to advocacy outside of the workplace. The United Packinghouse Workers of America union was instrumental in desegregating the city of Waterloo, Iowa. Members of the union organized walkouts at businesses that refused to serve Black people, even suing a discriminatory tavern owner in 1952. The union also fought against discrimination in other workplaces (Yeung and Grabell 2020).

Following WWII and the death of President Franklin Roosevelt, anti-labor sentiment became more popular (Stromquist 1993). The passing of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 signaled the beginning of the end of an era of worker power. The act's provisions weakened unions and set the stage for the right-to-work (RTW) laws that state legislators, including those in Iowa, would soon pass. These laws significantly decreased the power of labor unions by reducing their funding and size (Stromquist 1993). Prior to RTW laws, unions would receive dues from each worker who benefited from the union, regardless of whether they were active union members. This was done to avoid the "free rider" effect, in which no one is willing to pay for benefits if they can otherwise enjoy them for free. RTW laws prohibited unions from charging dues to nonunion members, effectively shrinking their numbers, reducing their resources, and ultimately weakening their ability to negotiate for adequate protections (Stromquist 1993).

While union power was decreasing nationwide, the meatpacking industry was increasing its reliance on immigrant labor. Immigrants were often willing to work for lower wages and in worse conditions than US-born workers, making them targets for exploitation by plant owners. This shifting labor landscape raised new questions for labor unions. Could the immigrants be organized? And if so, should they be? It was a common belief among union members—including those in the UCFW, the union that covers many of Iowa’s meatpacking plants—that undocumented immigrant workers were taking American jobs, and that they were often hired by plants as a union-busting tactic (Gonyea 2013). While unions’ attitudes toward immigrants began to shift in the early 2000s, some immigrants were reluctant to trust the unions due to previous tense relationships between the two groups, and the decline in the unions’ power continued (Jacobson and Geron 2008).

“Immigrants were often willing to work for lower wages and in worse conditions than US-born workers, making them targets for exploitation by plant owners.”

Over the course of the 20th century, anti-union policies and tensions with immigrant populations weakened unions that had once been powerful. Stronger unions are necessary to address the challenges facing meatpackers today, and the following sections explore how unions could rebuild the strength they once had.

HOW CAN WE PROTECT MEATPACKERS TODAY?

The dangers that meatpackers in Iowa and across the country face are not new. In fact, they have been around for almost a century. Various policies rooted in neoliberal ideology—the belief that markets should be drivers of change—have tried to solve these safety issues, but have repeatedly failed. According to neoliberal philosophy, citizens can be viewed as consumers who vote with their wallets (Monbiot 2016). However, if individuals vote with their wallets, those with larger wallets have a larger impact—meaning wealthy individuals hold greater sway than the average citizen. As Deb and Jeff Hansen (owners of Iowa Select Farms, mentioned earlier in this brief) have demonstrated, wealthy Iowans have shown themselves to care more about protecting profits than protecting their workers.

In 2008, the Jewish community in Postville, IA created the Magen Tzedek “Star of Justice” program in response to poor working conditions at Agriprocessors, a local kosher meatpacking plant with a history of employing undocumented immigrants and underaged workers (Haedicke 2013).

Led by Magen Tzedek, a certification process was created to identify and label meat from plants with working conditions that met a list of fair labor standards, including wage levels; employees’ right to collectively bargain; equitable immigration hiring policies; and fair allowances for sick, family, and vacation leave. Haedicke (2013) argues that programs like this, which place the responsibility for effecting change in consumers’ hands, rely on neoliberal beliefs and are ultimately ineffective. Instead, he argues, power must be placed in the hands of the workers through strong unions.

A recent study demonstrates the inherent fallacy of a neoliberal, consumer-driven approach to effecting change. The study questions whether consumers would be willing to pay more for meat produced in facilities that meet COVID-safe working conditions. Copfer (2021) found that respondents in the Midwest were unwilling to pay more for COVID-safe meat, instead requiring a 25 cent/pound *discount* in order to purchase COVID-safe meat over the standard alternative. Still, this study provides further evidence that consumers are unlikely to positively impact working conditions for meatpackers through their purchasing decisions. The most effective strategy to protect workers and fight back against the abusive labor practices of today’s meatpacking monopolies is to strengthen labor unions in Iowa.

Labor unions have historically given meatpacking workers the power to advocate for their own safety and well-being in the workplace. During the New Deal era of strong unions, meatpacking unions were able to slow line speeds, integrate the workplace, increase women’s power, and decrease the length of the workweek—all without penalty to workers (Yeung and Grabell 2020). Since then, unions have also successfully bargained for new safety policies, such as dedicated time allowances for knife sharpening, which can reduce blade-related injuries (Stromquist 1993). History shows that strong unions with the ability to stand up to employers can mitigate issues such as unsafe line speeds, lack of restroom breaks, forced overtime, low wages, and other coercive labor practices.

“The most effective strategy to protect workers and fight back against the abusive labor practices of today’s meatpacking monopolies is to strengthen labor unions in Iowa.”

Despite these results, Iowa enacted right-to-work laws in 1947, drawing a flood of worker protests (Stromquist 1993). NPR reports that between 1964 and 2012, Iowa union membership fell from 27.7 percent to 10.9 percent. While Iowa's union membership rates are still higher than those in many southern and western states (Bui 2015), they are clearly still not high enough to adequately ensure the protection of workers' rights against employer greed and negligence.

Right-to-work laws not only decrease union and worker power, but also make the workplace more dangerous. Zoorob (2018) reports that right-to-work laws have resulted in a 14.2 percent increase in worker mortality in all industries across the United States. For an already dangerous industry like meatpacking, it is especially important that workers are part of strong unions that can bargain for robust safety policies.

Some researchers have argued that right-to-work laws have benefited the economy by improving job growth and lowering unemployment rates (Eisenach 2018), or that the decline of unions has been helpful rather than harmful (Epstein 2020; Thompson 2012; Bradley et al. 2017). However, many of these arguments only consider improvements in broad economic conditions, rather than the specific conditions of union employees. Epstein (2020) argues that unions only gain power at the cost of employers, and that the decline of unions is therefore a good thing for the economy. Thompson (2012) compiles negative comments from Americans about unions, claiming that they are unnecessary and politically motivated. Bradley et al. (2017) claim that unions inhibit innovation, and that only right-to-work laws can reverse this effect. Again, all argue that unions have an overall negative economic effect, but none make any mention of how unions impact workplace conditions. On the other hand, the majority of Americans believe that the decline in union membership is a negative development (Green 2022).

Evidence shows that contrary to these authors' assertions, unions positively impact the economy by helping employees negotiate for higher wages—increasing their purchasing power and in turn stimulating the economy. The positive impact of increased purchasing power is not a new concept; in fact, it was the cornerstone of the federal government's decision to distribute stimulus checks at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, which aimed to catalyze local spending by putting money directly in the

“Right-to-work laws not only decrease union and worker power, but also make the workplace more dangerous.”

pockets of consumers. By guaranteeing healthy wages for employees, strong unions enable consumers to support both their local and national economies (Madland and Walters 2009).

REBUILDING WORKER POWER IN IOWA

Until Iowa's right-to-work law is repealed, unions will be unable to reach the size and strength needed to meaningfully improve working conditions.

As noted earlier, right-to-work laws exempt employees from paying union dues if they are not active members, therefore reducing unions' size, financial resources, and bargaining power. (Stromquist 1993). Much of a union's work requires financial resources. In order to ensure worker safety and rights in the workplace, unions go through negotiations with employers, hold meetings with workers and employers to determine what changes must be made, and spend time and resources to make changes happen (such as safer working conditions, higher wages, and protections from employer retaliation) (United Food and Commercial Workers [UFCW] 2022). Doing all of this therefore requires dues, as it costs money—for example, negotiators must be paid, campaigns require advertising, meeting spaces must be rented. Prior to right-to-work laws, dues were required to be paid by all employees who were benefiting from the union. However, right-to-work laws ban unions from collecting dues from nonunion members and ban unions from forcing new employees to join the union. As a result, unions are smaller and receive less funding, which makes it more difficult to make improvements in the workplace (Kurtzleben 2015). Unions will not be able to make major changes without the support and funds of a broad base of employees.

The Iowa Senate Committee on Labor and Business Relations and the Iowa House Committee on Labor both have the power to propose a repeal of the state's right-to-work law. Though a majority of both committees' members are Republican—the party that has led anti-union efforts in recent decades, most recently with the breakdown of collective bargaining rights for public employees in 2017 (Bleeding Heartland 2017)—these individuals may be receptive to arguments that demonstrate the economic benefits of unions. Studies have shown that repealing RTW laws would help grow the economy by increasing wages and, as a result, consumer spending. Furthermore, individuals looking for high-wage union jobs would be drawn to Iowa, increasing the state's tax revenue and helping mitigate the current labor shortage.

Another step toward rebuilding worker power in Iowa would be to bring the issue to the attention of local pro-worker groups, such as the Iowa Labor Center and the Center for Worker Justice of Eastern Iowa, which have already taken efforts to educate workers about their rights and advocate for change. In 2016, the Center for Worker Justice of



Eastern Iowa led a successful campaign to pass Iowa's first county-level minimum wage increase, which four other counties in the state then followed. When the state legislature nullified the increase, the organization pushed back and convinced over 160 businesses to honor the new minimum wage regardless (CWJ 2022). These organizations will be strong allies in the fight to repeal RTW laws, especially given their experience effecting change in the face of an uncooperative state legislature.

In addition to repealing right-to-work laws, meatpacking unions can gain strength by encouraging the industry's large foreign-born population to become members. One step in this direction would be to produce safety materials in all of the languages spoken in plants, rather than just in English and Spanish. In addition, unions should be actively fighting on the behalf of immigrant workers, particularly when it comes to immigration policies—while some efforts on this front have been made, they are far from perfect. For example, the AFL-CIO supports “comprehensive immigration reform,” but its proposed reforms call for stronger borders and increased regulations—initiatives which may alienate current immigrants, especially those who are in the country without authorization (AFL-CIO 2009).

Repealing right-to-work laws is only the first step to improving working conditions; unions will need to do further work to stop employers from actively suppressing organizing and exploiting workers. Nonetheless, it is a powerful first step. Unions with the ability to collect dues from all eligible workers will have the size, resources, and influence needed to champion workers, drive change, and stand up to exploitative meatpacking monopolies.



CONCLUSION

Employers in the meatpacking industry have a long history of implementing practices that reduce workers' power for their own enrichment. Stories like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* brought these horrors to the attention of the public over a century ago, but further efforts are required to help Americans understand that these problems persist in the 21st century.

Today, workers' lack of power is reflected not only by low wages, harsh working conditions, and anti-union attitudes that continue to define the industry, but also by the lack of COVID-19 protections that have led to disproportionate rates of infection in meatpacking communities. Workers' lack of power is further reflected the reliance on undocumented labor that has resulted in some of the largest workplace ICE raids in US history.

While there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution to restore worker power, repealing Iowa's right-to-work laws and encouraging strong unions is an important first step. The road to achieving this goal may be long, but it is one that unions, policymakers, and community members must take to alleviate the inhumane working conditions that define today's meatpacking industry.



REFERENCES

- AFL-CIO. 2009. "Resolution 11: The Labor Movement's Principles for Comprehensive Immigration Reform." September 13, 2009. <https://aflcio.org/resolution/labor-movements-principles-comprehensive-immigration-reform>.
- Artz, Georgeanne, Rebecca Jackson, and Peter F. Orazem. 2010. "Is It a Jungle Out There? Meat Packing, Immigrants, and Rural Communities." *Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics* 35, no. 2 (August): 299–315. <https://ageconsearch.umn.edu/record/93220>
- Asher, Robert, and Mary Lee Dunn. 2014. "Organized Labor and the Origins of the Occupational Safety and Health Act." *NEW SOLUTIONS: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy* 24, no. 3 (September): 279–301. <https://doi.org/10.2190/NS.24.3.d>.
- Associated Press. 2021. "Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds Auctioned off Her Time for Pork Barons' Charity." *The Gazette*, February 8, 2021. <https://www.thegazette.com/government-politics/iowa-gov-kim-reynolds-auctioned-off-her-time-for-pork-barons-charity/>.
- Barry, Dan. 2014. "The 'Boys' in the Bunkhouse." *The New York Times*, March 8, 2014, sec. US. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/03/09/us/the-boys-in-the-bunkhouse.html>. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/03/09/us/the-boys-in-the-bunkhouse.html>.
- BBC News. 2020. "Tyson Food Managers Bet on Workers Getting Covid-19, Lawsuit Says." BBC News, November 19, 2020, sec. US & Canada. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55009228>.
- Belin, Laura. 2021. "New 'Reemployment' Plan Won't Solve Iowa Workforce Shortage." *Bleeding Heartland* (blog). October 24, 2021. <https://www.bleedingheartland.com/2021/10/24/new-reemployment-plan-wont-solve-iowa-workforce-shortage/>.
- Bleeding Heartland. 2017. "The Real Reason Iowa Republicans Want to Break Public Unions." *Bleeding Heartland*, February 15, 2017. <https://www.bleedingheartland.com/2017/02/14/the-real-reason-iowa-republicans-want-to-break-public-unions/>.
- Bui, Quoc Trung. 2015. "50 Years Of Shrinking Union Membership, In One Map." *NPR*, February 23, 2015. <https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2015/02/23/385843576/50-years-of-shrinking-union-membership-in-one-map>.
- Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). 2022. "Slaughterers and Meat Packers." February 19, 2022. [https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes513023.htm#\(9\)](https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes513023.htm#(9)).



- Burgoon, Brian, Janice Fine, Wade Jacoby, and Daniel Tichenor. 2010. "Immigration and the Transformation of American Unionism." *The International Migration Review* 44, no. 4: 933–73. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40930956>
- Campos, Antonio. 2021. "What's the Difference between Hispanic, Latino and Latinx?" *University of California*, October 6, 2021. <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/choosing-the-right-word-hispanic-latino-and-latinx>.
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 2020. "Update: COVID-19 Among Workers in Meat and Poultry Processing Facilities – United States, April–May 2020." July 10, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6927e2.htm>.
- Center for Worker Justice (CWJ). 2022. "Our Work." *Center for Worker Justice of Eastern Iowa* (blog). Accessed May 15, 2022. <https://cwjiowa.org/our-work/>.
- Champlin, Dell, and Eric Hake. 2006. "Immigration as Industrial Strategy in American Meatpacking." *Review of Political Economy* 18, no. 1 (August): 49–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09538250500354140>.
- Chang, Alvin, Michael Sainato, Nina Lakhani, Rashida Kamal, and Aliya Uteuova. 2021. "The Pandemic Exposed the Human Cost of the Meatpacking Industry's Power: 'It's Enormously Frightening.'" *The Guardian*, November 16, 2021, sec. Environment. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/16/meatpacking-industry-covid-outbreaks-workers>.
- Copfer, Jackie. 2021. "Impact of COVID-19 Outbreaks at US Meatpacking Plants on Consumer Preference and Willingness to Pay for Safe Essential Worker Conditions: Evidence from Discrete Choice Survey Analysis," Working paper. Self-published. https://are.berkeley.edu/sites/are.berkeley.edu/files/Honors_Thesis_Copfer.pdf.
- Crowder, Courtney, and MacKenzie Elmer. 2022. "A Decade after a Massive Raid Nabbed 400 Undocumented Workers, This Tiny Town Fights to Reclaim Its Identity." *Des Moines Register*, February 21, 2022. <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/investigations/2018/05/10/postville-immigration-raid-10-year-anniversary-town-reclaims-identity/587995002/>.
- Dalla, Rochelle L., and April Christensen. 2005. "Latino Immigrants Describe Residence in Rural Midwestern Meatpacking Communities: A Longitudinal Assessment of Social and Economic Change." *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 27, no. 1 (February): 23–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739986304272354>.

- Deese, Brian, Sameera Fazili, and Bharat Ramamurti. 2021. "Addressing Concentration in the Meat-Processing Industry to Lower Food Prices for American Families." *The White House* (blog). September 8, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/blog/2021/09/08/addressing-concentration-in-the-meat-processing-industry-to-lower-food-prices-for-american-families/>.
- Des Moines Register Staff. 2020. "Iowa Sits Out Study Showing Minorities Affected More by Coronavirus in Meatpacking Plants." 2020. *Des Moines Register*, July 8, 2020. <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/health/2020/07/08/iowa-declines-part-study-coronavirus-meatpacking-plants/5402161002/>.
- Des Moines Register Staff. 2021. "COVID Infections among Meatpacking Workers Much Higher than Previously Reported, New Report Says." 2021. *Des Moines Register*, October 27, 2021. <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/2021/10/27/covid-among-meatpacking-workers-iowa-more-than-twice-estimate-report-says/8570176002/>.
- Francis, Meredith. 2020. "How Upton Sinclair's 'The Jungle' Unintentionally Spurred Food Safety Laws." *WTTW Chicago*. January 23, 2020. <https://interactive.wttw.com/playlist/2020/01/23/the-jungle-food-safety>.
- Gerr, Fred. 2021. "Meatpacking Plant Workers: A Case Study of a Precarious Workforce." *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Hygiene* 18, no. 4–5 (April): 154–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15459624.2021.1895997>.
- Gonyea, Don. 2013. "How The Labor Movement Did A 180 On Immigration." *NPR*, February 5, 2013, sec. Politics. <https://www.npr.org/2013/02/05/171175054/how-the-labor-movement-did-a-180-on-immigration>.
- Haedicke, Michael A. 2013. "From Collective Bargaining to Social Justice Certification: Workers' Rights in the American Meatpacking Industry." *Sociological Focus* 46 no. 2 (April): 119–37.
- Human Rights Watch. 2004. *Blood, Sweat and Fear — Workers' Rights in US Meat and Poultry Plants*. Washington DC: Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/usa0105.pdf>.
- Iowa Legislature. 2022a. "Iowa Legislature - Committee Information." February 20, 2022. <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/committees/committee?ga=89&groupID=629>.
- "———." 2022b. February 20, 2022. <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/committees/committee?ga=89&groupID=325>.
- Knox, Ron. 2020. "Monopolies in Meat: Endangering Workers, Farmers, and Consumers." *The American Prospect*, May 4, 2020. <https://prospect.org/economy/meat-monopolies-endanger-workers-farmers-consumers/>.

- Kurtzleben, Danielle. 2015. "Right-to-Work: The Anti-Union Laws Now on the Books in 25 States." *Vox*, March 9, 2015.. <https://www.vox.com/2015/3/8/8163139/right-to-work-explained>.
- Jacobson, Robin, and Kim Geron. 2008. "Unions and the Politics of Immigration." *Socialism and Democracy* 22, no. 3 (September): 105–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300802361620>.
- Jett, Tyler. 2021 "State Figures: Hispanic Workers Had Most Coronavirus Infections at Iowa Meatpacking Plants Last Spring." *Des Moines Register*, March 12, 2021. <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/money/business/2021/03/12/iowa-department-public-health-hispanic-meatpacking-workers-most-coronavirus-infections-spring-2020/6954498002/>.
- Ludden, Jennifer. 2008. "Kosher Meat Plant Faces Child Labor Allegations." *NPR*, September 10, 2008, sec. Business. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94449437>.
- Lynch, James. 2021. "Slow Growth Adds to Iowa Worker Shortage." *Waterloo Cedar Falls Courier*. November 17, 2021. https://wcfcourier.com/news/local/state-and-regional/slow-growth-adds-to-iowa-worker-shortage/article_3b1e150a-b3c3-5df5-bb70-7a2eaeb20ad2.html.
- Madland, David, and Karla Walter. 2009. "Unions Are Good for the American Economy." *Center for American Progress Action* (blog), February 18, 2009. <https://www.americanprogressaction.org/article/unions-are-good-for-the-american-economy-2/>.
- Mitchell, Charlie, and Austin Frerick. 2021. "Iowa Select Killed Family Farms and Transformed Pork Production Forever." *Vox*, April 19, 2021. Accessed May 28, 2022. <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/22344953/iowa-select-jeff-hansen-pork-farming>.
- Monbiot, George. 2016. "Neoliberalism—the Ideology at the Root of All Our Problems." *The Guardian*, April 15, 2016, sec. Books. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot>.
- Murphy, Erin. 2022. "Iowa Seeing 'Most Acute Workforce Shortage in a Generation.'" February 20, 2022. <https://www.thegazette.com/employment/iowa-workforce-shortage-persists-months-after-state-ended-extra-jobless-aid/>.
- National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). 2022. "The Law | National Labor Relations Board." n.d. Accessed May 28, 2022. <https://www.nlr.gov/about-nlr/rights-we-protect/the-law>.
- Phelps, Becky. 2022. "Experts Say Iowa Is Facing Shortage in Labor Supply Due to Multiple Factors." *KCRG.com*. February 20, 2022. <https://www.kcrg.com/2021/05/12/experts-say-iowa-is-facing-shortage-in-labor-supply/>.

- Ramos, Athena K., Marcela Carvajal-Suarez, Natalia Trinidad, Sophia A. Quintero, Diana Molina, Rebecca Johnson-Beller, and Sheri A. Rowland. 2021. "Health and Well-Being of Hispanic/Latino Meatpacking Workers in Nebraska: An Application of the Health Belief Model." *Workplace Health & Safety* 69, no. 12 (June): 564–572. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21650799211016907>.
- Ramos, Athena K., Marcela Carvajal-Suarez, Natalia Trinidad, Sophia Quintero, Diana Molina, and Sheri A. Rowland. 2020. "'No Somos Máquinas' (We Are Not Machines): Worker Perspectives of Safety Culture in Meatpacking Plants in the Midwest." *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* 64, no. 2 (December): 84–96. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajim.23206>.
- Saitone, Tina L., K. Aleks Schaefer, and Daniel P. Scheitrum. 2021. "COVID-19 Morbidity and Mortality in US Meatpacking Counties." *Food Policy* 101 (May): 102072. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2021.102072>.
- Stromquist, Shelton. 1993. *Solidarity & Survival: An Oral History of Iowa Labor in the Twentieth Century*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Stuesse, Angela, and Nathan T. Dollar. 2022. "Who Are America's Meat and Poultry Workers?" *Economic Policy Institute* (blog). September 24, 2020. <https://www.epi.org/blog/meat-and-poultry-worker-demographics/>.
- Van Green, Ted. 2022. "Majorities Say Decline of Labor Unions Is Bad for US, Working People." Pew Research Center, February 18, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/02/18/majorities-of-adults-see-decline-of-union-membership-as-bad-for-the-u-s-and-working-people/>.
- United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). 2022. "Packing and Processing." *The United Food & Commercial Workers International Union* (blog). Accessed May 30, 2022. <https://www.ufcw.org/who-we-represent/packing-and-processing/>.
- Warren, Wilson. 2000. *Struggling With "Iowa's Pride" Labor Relations, Unionism, and Politics in the Rural Midwest Since 1877*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Weinstock, Deborah, and Tara Failey. 2014. "The Labor Movement's Role in Gaining Federal Safety and Health Standards to Protect America's Workers." *NEW SOLUTIONS: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy* 24, no. 3 (September): 409–34. <https://doi.org/10.2190/NS.24.3.k>.
- Zoorob, Michael. 2018. "Does 'Right to Work' Imperil the Right to Health? The Effect of Labour Unions on Workplace Fatalities." *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 75, no. 10 (June): 736–38. <https://doi.org/10.1136/oemed-2017-104747>.



[ROOSEVELTINSTITUTE.ORG](https://rooseveltinstitute.org)