
THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left

Summer 2021

Precarious employment

The US public's appetite for meat is well known. More than 130 billion pounds of beef, pork, and chicken are processed in the US per year. To support this demand, the meatpacking industry employs just under one-half million workers, predominantly in the Midwest and Southeast. As is often the case with dangerous and physically demanding work, persons of color and persons born outside the US are overrepresented among meatpacking workers. Many observers believe that employment of undocumented foreign workers has been a common practice in the industry.

The hazards of industrial-scale meat processing have been known for more than a century. In 1906, Upton Sinclair wrote, "There are learned people who can tell you that beef-boners make forty cents an hour, but, perhaps, these people have never looked at a beef-boner's hands" (*The Jungle*). In 1987, the *New York Times* noted that meatpacking "remains today the most hazardous industry in America." Physical hazards experienced by these workers include forceful and repeated exertions with the hands and arms, heavy lifting, and sharp cutting tools. As a consequence, they experience chronic and disabling disorders of muscle, tendons, nerves, and joints as well as lacerations and

traumatic injuries.

For those unfamiliar with meatpacking, the sheer mass of meat handled by workers may be surprising. If each worker handled just once each pound of meat produced in the US, then each worker would manipulate 339 pounds of meat per hour. Repetitive movements are also common with workers performing up to 24,000 knife cuts per day. "Live hang" workers can lift 30,000 pounds of poultry per day manually lifting chickens onto the processing line. Unsurprisingly, meatpacking workers experience high rates of injury and illness. The US Department of Labor reported that meat processing workers experienced lost work time injuries at twice the rate of other industrial workers. University studies have found rates of musculoskeletal illness and injury even higher than those reported by the DOL.

How is it possible that the world's richest and most technologically advanced nation has such high rates of preventable injury and illness in a major industry? Isn't OSHA supposed to protect workers from known hazards? In fact, in the late 1990s, OSHA developed a standard to reduce ergonomic hazards. The OSHA Ergonomics Program Standard was issued in

2000 "to address the significant risk of employee exposure to ergonomic risk factors" and represented an important regulatory step in the effort to prevent ergonomic injuries. However, in March 2001, President George W. Bush signed a joint resolution of Congress disapproving the Ergonomics Program Standard enacted less than five months earlier.

Given the long history of weak protection of meat processing workers from occupational injury and illness, it is no surprise that these workers are also poorly protected from new health threats. The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 among meatpacking workers illustrates such failure. As of October 2020, 24% of meatpacking workers were infected with COVID-19. In comparison, 2.8% of workers in non-meat food production were infected. Two responses by the federal government to the pandemic likely contributed to its disproportionate impact among meatpacking workers. First, in April 2020, the White House issued an executive order preventing the closure of meatpacking plants (regardless of infection rate). Second, OSHA recommended, but did not require, voluntary compliance with COVID-prevention guidelines. OSHA's limited response

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Mental illness: the silent epidemic

As we navigate through Covid, we must face the fact that there will be a new normal. There will be new illnesses, both physical and mental. New terms like “long-haulers” have already entered our lexicon. If history repeats itself, which it tends to do, the physical ailments will garner the majority of attention from media and in our discussions with our Monday morning coffee crews. The external and concrete nature of physical ailments lends such conditions to gaining our attention. You may have heard the term long-hauler, but were you aware that 34% of Covid survivors develop a neurological or psychiatric disorder?

Obviously, I am setting up a false dichotomy when I juxtapose physical ailments with mental ailments. However, it has been my experience that this is exactly what most folks do when discussing mental illness or encountering someone suffering from a mental illness. This is yet another unconscious bias that we must actively address and resist. We must work to promote a better understanding of mental illness. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, mental illnesses are among the most common health disorders in the United States. More than 50% of U.S. adults will need mental health treatment at some point during their lifetime. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that nearly one in five adults in the country (43.8 million) was living with mental illness in 2014.

Broach the topic with friends, and the flood gates open. A beloved cousin who committed suicide, an adult sibling who is violent towards their aging parents due to schizophrenia, a father who died in a parking lot after self-medicating for

depression – all this in my own family alone! The pain caused by mental illness affects so many families, yet so few families talk to others about it. They are often left to their own devices to cobble together ways to address the illness. On top of the emotional distress, this isolation can cause considerable financial hardship for loved ones turned caretakers.

Stigmatization, a diluted term dulled by casual overuse, has almost become a cliché. The failure of a decades-long effort to knock down stigmatization is especially damaging to the affected person who internalizes the stigma. It may lead them to avoiding treatment until the effects of their mental illness become acute, often causing them to eschew medications and to seek isolation. I have witnessed this first-hand, when I represented the State of Iowa in mental health commitment hearings. There was a common pattern. The patient would stabilize with the help of doctors, be prescribed treatment that would work, then eventually return after they had stopped treatment, lacking the support to keep them on course. It is a revolving door in an outdated system.

Shortage of beds is another cliché, diluted and dulled by casual overuse. Type “shortage of psychiatric beds” in your search engine, and you will find articles going back for decades. The shortage of inpatient care and other varieties of care for people with mental illness is a public health crisis. In 2018, one Kansas hospital turned away 2,000 children with psychiatric needs alone. Individuals who require intensive psychiatric care often find themselves homeless or, more frequently, in prison. Beds are not the only resource in short supply. There is a severe shortage of outpatient resources as well as follow-up care to meet mental health needs.

These are just a few of the issues facing folks with mental illness and their families. We are dealing with a silent epidemic as ancient as humanity itself. It is time to address the stigma. It is time to hold a hand out to those affected by mental illness instead of looking the other way. It is time to set up structures for treating mental illness as an illness rather than a crime. It is time to break down the revolving door.

There has been progress. Organizations like the National Alliance on Mental Illness have worked hard at expanding their operations. Today, this non-profit organization holds informative walks, organizes peer to peer counseling, and works tirelessly to end stigma. Local governments are investing in new institutions and systems, such as the GuideLink Center in Iowa City, to create a nexus for first contact aimed at people who need assistance. Several counties in Iowa have created mental health courts designed to develop long-term relationships with folks who need services, instead of getting people stable and out the door.

Stigma, shortages, and seclusion: this has been the narrative of a silent epidemic for decades. One solution starts with us! If you and I talk to our friends openly about our loved ones with mental illness, perhaps we can effect change. Had my family talked about mental illness sooner, perhaps my father would be alive today.

—*Scott Finlayson is deputy treasurer for Johnson County.*

America loves...

Famed adman Ed Labunski penned the catchy, classic jingle that branded American culture as “We Love Baseball, Hotdogs, Apple Pie and Chevrolet.” Eating one at the ballpark just somehow tasted different from an ordinary hotdog, and dreams of sharing that first hotdog with your young son’s first trip to a ballgame brought wistful smiles to baseball fans throughout the country. Yes, American culture from the 70s was very different from our culture today. We focused on relating to each other, based on shared experiences and desires. My adult children tell me it comes across as rather narcissistic, but it really was just a 70s thing.

Alcoholics Anonymous reflected a different culture back then. Old-timers packed smoke-filled halls playing cribbage and drinking massive amounts of coffee. If you attended 12-step meetings regularly, you could quote what they’d say on each respective step. The first step, “we admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable,” was dubbed the drunkalogue. No matter how many decades you’d been sober, it was important to keep in the front of your mind what a miserable drunk you’d been. Tearing down statues from the past would have made no sense to these fellows. After all, AA is an honesty program. If you forget where you’ve been and who you’ve harmed, you’re on the road back to becoming that horrible excuse for a human being. “Once a drunk, always a drunk.” This approach worked for most members and as the AA Big Book teaches, don’t judge others; the key to life-long recovery is to focus on improving yourself.

That’s not to say that AA didn’t evolve over time. Nonsmokers decided they just couldn’t handle the immense amounts of second-hand

smoke; others felt that meetings should be more targeted or selective in their membership. Groups formed restricting membership to gender, profession, sexual orientation, age... the list goes on. Old-timers thought that sharing the desire to quit drinking was the most important thing to have in common. Life had taught them that working together towards the lifesaving goal of sobriety should be the main focus. Listen with an open mind and you’ll discover that, although details of the stories may be different, it was the consequences of these stories, the same excruciating pain, that bonds those in recovery. Younger members didn’t understand, they felt their experiences and needs were different from those crotchety old men.

Cultures need to evolve over time. For example, back in the day an intervention for alcoholism wasn’t a friendly circle of friends and family trying to break through the alcoholic’s denial by gently sharing stories about the pain caused by the alcoholic’s behavior and guiding them into seeking treatment. No, original interventions were mobs of self-proclaimed loved ones ganging up and brutally attacking the alcoholic and his unwanted behavior. The goal was to break down these dastardly drunks to rebuild them into acceptable, sober people who share the same thoughts and beliefs as other sterling members of society. Eventually this practice stopped. Bullying and ostracism is powerful for those engaging in it, but leaves a destructive path for others to clean up.

AA meetings continued to happily segregate into specialized groups that shared accepted thoughts and values. But then some young members started to question why they should seek a new group. Shouldn’t the present group change for them? Why were

the old-timers saying the Lord’s Prayer during meetings? Don’t they realize that this is offensive to other members who are atheists, agnostics or practice other religions? These old men should change for their own good. Their culture is outdated and insensitive. What these whippersnappers didn’t realize is that with culture, comes traditions.

Many people are familiar with 12-step programs, but are ignorant of the 12 traditions designed to address conflicts between members and to protect the purpose of AA. The first tradition stated: “Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon AA unity.” The belief that unity and common welfare is key to stability and sustainability has been lost to heated political discord that is brutally tearing this country apart with no leadership in sight for healing the divide.

Some corporations are tiptoeing through the consequences of violating another old AA tradition: holding “no opinion on outside issues; hence the AA name ought never be drawn into public controversy.” Chevrolet, long-time sponsor for Major League Baseball, has updated its commercial message from loving baseball, hotdogs and apple pie to baseball “reminds us of all that once was good, and that could be again.” But when MLB decided to slide into a murky political cesspool by moving the All-Star Game from Georgia to Colorado to protest a new voting law, it lost sight of its purpose of unity and bringing people together. Baseball once was as American as apple pie.

—Stephanie Fawkes-Lee is Senior Sports Correspondent for the *Prairie Progressive*, and a recovering lobbyist.

Knightville

Even after Reconstruction failed, and Florida turned Democratic, the Knights had remained Republicans. They all knew it made no difference in their lives who lived in the governor's mansion, or who went to Washington. Their wealth insulated them from any cracker Bolsheviks because neither party let those radicals in the game. As long as the Democrats did not tell them how to run their businesses, or steal too much in taxes, the Knights were happy. During the Great Depression, they even made the New Deal work in their favor, subletting land to the CCC and taking money for roads and a new post office. If you had asked Norton's grandfather or father why they were Republicans, they might have offered an olio of political clichés, but Norton Knight knew the truth, told to him by his father the first time they surveyed the northern extremity of Knight land, debating how to extract more wealth from that land.

"Democrats are stupid fucks, son. They have neither class nor culture nor the ability to retract their heads out of their asses. How can you respect any man like that?"

Norton had been dumbfounded. His father's excessive profanity was well known within the family, a daily barrage that would eventually turn Norton himself into a man known for seldom ever using profanity. Norton had listened to his father and realized that his father was actually talking about himself. His wealth had brought him neither class nor culture. Norton also realized that his father actually believed that he had earned his wealth, not that it had been handed to him by the

merest cosmic chance of having the right parents. Norton dwelled on the word *respect*. He did not respect his father, he finally understood, but he also saw how nobody else in town did either. His father avoided books and music; Norton absorbed them. His father cheated on his mother: Norton swore that he would sooner not get married than prove to eventually be unfaithful. His father seldom left Knightville; Norton left home as soon as he graduated from high school. He went to college, to travel, to find somebody he could love forever, although he knew that he had already found that person back in Knightville.

Norton had told himself that when he came back from his travels that he would be a different kind of Knight. Instead, he married Ashley. He joined the respectable civic groups. He donated to local schools and charities. He made weekly appearances at all of the Knight businesses. He would walk downtown and speak to anyone who spoke to him. He avoided any discussions of politics, knowing that he was out of step with the town. He did not proselytize for his Republican friends, nor against his Democratic friends. Down deep, he knew that Republicans were more respectable than the Democrats. They always had been. Did he aspire to office? "Never," he would say. His real reason was kept to himself. Politicians prided themselves on representing the people, of working *for* the people. The most honest thing that Norton ever acknowledged, but only to himself, was that he would never work *for* anybody, especially the *people*.

He had lived long enough to see Florida go from blue to red. Race and religion replaced capitalism as

a rationale for Republican success. Norton might have been privately appalled by Republicans, but he still had no respect for Democrats. *Tax and spend* was still a true cliché for them. *Cut taxes, spend anyway, and hate your neighbor* was how he saw the new Republicans. During the 2010 election cycle, he started quoting Yeats to himself: *The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity*. But then he saw the same lines uttered by a Democratic columnist, exhorting other Democrats against the mob Tea Party. Knight wanted to throttle the columnist and his implication that the Democrats were the "best" but lacked conviction. *The Democrats are stupid fucks*, he had muttered to the columnist who was a thousand miles away in New York City. That began his own political exile. He could no longer use his education to set himself apart from *the people*. His insights were not original. Even poetry he loved could be marshaled in the service of those for whom he had no respect.

His accountant had once asked him if he had ever voted for a Democrat. Norton had been adamant: *When Hell freezes over*.

—An excerpt from Larry Baker's novel *WYMAN AND THE FLORIDA KNIGHTS*, to be published in November, wherein the richest man in central Florida explains the difference between Republicans and Democrats.

Still not enough

I believe in the power, resilience, and ingenuity of the Iowa City community.

This has always been true, but during the past year Iowa City residents have faced extraordinary challenges and singular opportunities, and we have responded. Protesting against racial injustice; painting the Broadway Street Mural; helping each other clear out trees and damage while providing clean water, generators, and refrigerator space after the derecho; sharing information and online menus to keep local restaurants and retail afloat; supporting food drives and non-profit campaigns. . .we have shown up. And we did it while we social distanced, worried about our jobs, health, loved ones, money, education, children, and our future as a democracy. This is the power of community in Iowa City. We must continue to find ways to harness this power, not just in crisis or pandemic. We need to emerge from COVID with gratitude and determination.

From my own experience as a co-founder of NESTS (Nurturing Every Students Together Safely), I know firsthand of the power and action community efforts can create. We conceived and supported micro-hubs for students and families struggling against barriers that COVID revealed and intensified. From the beginning, our focus was to provide students with safety, technology, and educational support. We also addressed food security, stress relief, and childcare. As a grassroots organization, we moved quickly: from our first meeting in mid-July to the beginning of the school year six weeks later, our small group secured funding and opened four micro-hubs on the South and East sides. We also worked with the Pheasant Ridge

neighborhood and North Liberty to create NESTS that suited their needs.

But here's the thing. It wasn't nearly enough. We know that NESTS helped some students and families, but the lack of access to fundamental needs is frankly staggering. NESTS and other helpmeets for struggling families are at best a band-aid. What does it say that the South District Neighborhood Association and Habitat for Humanity delivered more than 1400 meals to Iowa City families since January? The bleak truth is that COVID has revealed

“The lack of access
to fundamental needs
is staggering.”

economic and racial inequities in our community that extend well past education, and that too many people already encountered as part of their daily lives. When the Iowa City Community School District is not dealing with a pandemic, providing food, childcare, physical and emotional safety are also expected services. School administrators, staff, teachers, student family advocates, facilities workers, and volunteers all have made it their jobs to mitigate inequities as best they can. It is heroic; it is still not enough. We need to re-examine the solutions we have in place and find better ones.

As we move into summer, and thankfully more vaccines are getting into arms, I've heard the hopeful refrain, “I can't wait until we get back to normal,” in casual

conversation. It is both heartfelt and incredulous: after this past year, can it be? Do we get to go back to the way it was?

I hope not. Because that means we might squander an historic opportunity to make a better normal.

As we grapple with the impact of COVID and challenges it has revealed, we address equity and economic issues for what they are: community issues needing a lot of committed and active participation, consensus building, and funding that will generate better solutions. We can't unknow what COVID has revealed to many of us, and we can't leave those most affected by COVID behind in the name of normalcy.

With money from the American Recovery Act coming directly to cities, we must make sure that we use this money with our values firmly on display so that the post-COVID health of Iowa City can be felt by the entire community. Good change, good trouble, and good opportunities can happen locally if we make them happen. The issues we face are all connected: equity issues are economic issues are community issues. Let's take this momentous opportunity to make Iowa City a place where everyone has the opportunity and access to enjoy it. This is why I'm running for City Council: let's make a better normal together. I firmly believe we can and that we will.

—Megan Alter is a candidate for City Council of Iowa City (at-large), www.meganalterforcouncil.com. She is a Senior Resource Manager in Content at ACT, lives in the South District of Iowa City, and loves looking at other people's gardens.

Socialist potmaker honored by Iowa Women's Foundation

Artist, successful politician, socialist activist, small business entrepreneur, feminist icon, agency director: Karen Kubby has been a pioneer and role model. Her network extends from her Iowa City home to state and national circles such as the Socialist Party USA, where her influence resonates widely.

Karen has been engaged in political and social justice causes since the 1980s, when she participated in the Fair Rent Coalition and chaired the Iowa City Commission on Community Needs. She was elected on her third try to the Iowa City City Council in 1989 for the first of three terms. Initially facing condescension as a “socialist potmaker,” she proved she had the experience, judgment,

and temperament to be a potent voice on municipal issues. She soon developed her signature style: focus on the positive, respect all voices, and reject anger as a rhetorical tool.

In 1999, Karen became the director of the Emma Goldman Clinic. Her concentration on the needs of patients and staff, and on the credibility of the clinic as a vital community resource, continued her dedication to women and girls. Karen then surprised those who saw her mainly as a political activist, but delighted longtime admirers of her pottery and beadwork. She and her sister, Laurel, bought the business that is now Beadology in downtown Iowa City. It has become a welcoming space for those interested

in beadwork, from novices to sophisticated artists, and a refuge for friends to stop by and catch up on the day's events. She has become a leader among, and an effective spokesperson for, downtown merchants.

Karen's commitment to our community is evidence of, in her words, “living out one's values.” We are all deeply in her debt.

—Karen Kubby has been recognized in the 8th edition of *Ovation: A Tribute to Iowa Women and Girls*, published annually by the Iowa Women's Foundation, <https://iawf.org>. Lois Cox and Dave Leshtz submitted this tribute to Kubby, a longtime Prairie Progressive contributor and frequent PP Honor Roll awardee.

Precarious employment, cont'd from Page 1

to COVID-19 has been criticized as ineffective. For example, after Iowa OSHA fined a meat processor less than \$1000 for alleged COVID-19 related violations, the ACLU of Iowa and others filed a federal complaint against Iowa OSHA claiming that it failed to fulfill its legal obligation to protect workers during the pandemic.

While other US industries with physically demanding and hazardous working conditions (e.g., the garment industry) have moved production to developing nations with lower living standards and weaker worker protections, such off-shoring of meatpacking is not feasible. This has led some worker health advocates to conclude that US meat producers have instead imported the employment conditions of developing nations to their US facilities. Such conditions, including

low wages, poor protection from termination, weak regulatory protection, and an inability to exercise worker rights has been described as precarious employment. Depending on political orientation, it may be possible to conceptualize precarious employment as a form of economic inequality, worker exploitation, or even class struggle.

All workers, including those employed precariously, are entitled to a workplace free of known health hazards. No worker should have to sacrifice their health for employment. The fact that meat processing workers are predominantly persons of color and foreign-born is another example of our failure to remedy longstanding inequality. Strategies to limit the harm caused by precarious employment include support for organized

labor rights, a livable minimum wage, meaningful protection from retaliation of workers who report occupational injury or illness, ensuring that occupational safety and health regulators fulfill their legal obligations, and immigration reform to protect undocumented workers who report unsafe working conditions.

It is time to end 100 years of neglect and abuse of our meatpacking workers.

—Fred Gerr, MD, is a retired professor of occupational and environmental health who lives in rural Johnson County.

Prairie Dog's picks for summer reading

Blood Grove by Walter Mosley
Can't get enough of Easy Rawlins mysteries.

She Come By It Natural by Sarah Smarsh
Can't get enough of Dolly Parton.

Wonderama by Catherine Doty
Poems by a former Iowa City resident.

Waterbaby by Nikki Wallschlaeger
Poems by a future Iowa City resident.

Turning Pointe by Chloe Angyal

*Underground Railroad: The Green Book
and the Roots of Black Travel in America*
by Candace Taylor

Jesus and John Wayne
by Kristin Kobes du Mez

Convenience Store Woman by Sayaka Murata

*Black Baseball's Last Team Standing: The
Birmingham Black Barons* by William Plott



CALENDAR

May 24, 1941
Bob Dylan born

May 29, 1851
Sojourner Truth gave "Ain't I a Woman?" speech at Women's Rights Convention

May 31, 1921
Tulsa race massacre

June 5, 1981
First official AIDS diagnosis

June 8
Johnson County Board of Supervisors special election

June 22, 1941
Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union

June 27, 1876
Emma Goldman born

July 1, 1966
Medicare began

July 9
Johnson County Democrats Hall of Fame reception

July 24, 1946
First underwater atomic explosion, Bikini Island

What to the slave is the 4th of July?

—Frederick Douglass, 1852

It's a complex fate, being an American.

—Henry James

My motto was always to *keep swinging*.
Whether I was in a slump or feeling badly or
having trouble off the field, the only thing to do
was *keep swinging*. —Hank Aaron

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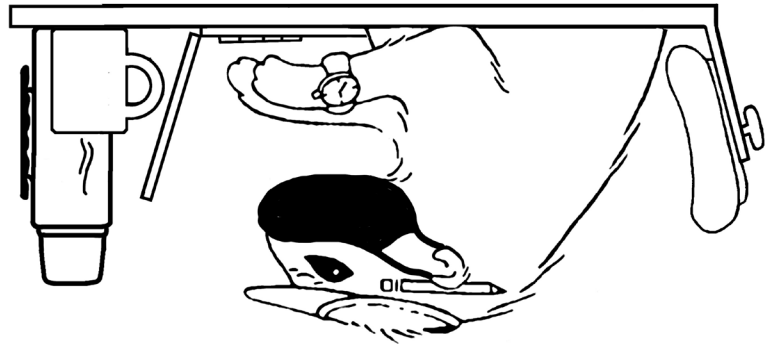
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