**Dangers, tensions lurk in meatpacking industry**

**A century after ‘The Jungle’ exposed troubles, problems persist**

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[OMAHA, Neb.](http://www.bing.com/maps/?v=2&where1=OMAHA,%20Neb.&sty=h&form=msdate) — He works in a world of long knives and huge saws, blood and bone, arctic chill and sweltering heat. For Martin Cortez, this is life on the line as a meatpacker.

It’s no place for the squeamish. Some workers can’t stomach the gore — chopping up the meat and bones of hundreds of cattle, day after day. Cortez has been at it more than 30 years. It also can be very dangerous. Some workers have been slashed, burned or scarred. He has not.

Even so, Martin Cortez doesn’t recommend the work. The thrashing animals, the heavy lifting ... all that goes into putting steak and hamburger on America’s dinner tables, he says, makes for a backbreaking day.

“You know what I like to say to newcomers?” he says. “They don’t kill cows. They kill people.”

This, some would say, is The Jungle of 2006.

It’s not anywhere near as horrible as the world muckraker Upton Sinclair surveyed 100 years ago in his sensational book “The Jungle.” A harrowing portrait of an immigrant’s oppressive life in meatpacking, the novel angered President Theodore Roosevelt, sent meat sales into a tailspin and inspired landmark consumer-protection laws.

Even the harshest critics acknowledge government regulations and inspectors have made meatpacking far cleaner and safer than it was when Sinclair described rats scurrying over piles of meat and sick animals stumbling to slaughter.

But 100 years later, the industry that produces the meat for America still faces some of the same tensions and troubles that Sinclair exposed.

In 1906, there were accusations the meatpacking giants exploited immigrants, battles over unions and complaints of paltry pay for hazardous work.

In 2006, the problems persist — though the names have changed. The eastern Europeans who flocked to Chicago’s bustling stockyards 100 years ago have been replaced by Mexican and Central American immigrants chasing their own dreams in the remote reaches of the rural Midwest and Southeast.

“It’s not as bad as it was in the sense of the sheer brutality of 100 years ago — before labor laws and food safety laws,” says Lance Compa, a Cornell University labor law expert who wrote a stinging Human Rights Watch report on the meat and poultry industry last year. “But for the times we’re in now, the situation is much in line with what it was 100 years ago.”

“It’s extremely dangerous when it shouldn’t be,” he says. “Workers are exploited when they shouldn’t be. The companies know it.”

The American Meat Institute, the trade group founded the same year Sinclair’s book was published, dismisses those claims. It says wages (about $25,000 a year) are competitive, turnover is wildly exaggerated and safety has dramatically improved in recent years.

“If Upton Sinclair walked through our plants today, he’d say he was a successful reformer,” says J. Patrick Boyle, the institute’s president. “He’d be astonished and, I think, impressed with the changes that have occurred.”

Some changes came almost immediately.

Within months after “The Jungle” was published, two landmark measures became law: the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act of 1906. More legislation and improved technology followed over the decades.

Boyle says in the last 15 years, there has been a new emphasis on partnerships — the union, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration and companies — collaborating to improve ergonomics, equipment and share ways to make the job safer.

It appears to have paid off: Federal figures show illnesses and injuries in the meat and poultry industry fell by half from 1992 to 2001 — from 29.5 to 14.7 per 100 full-time workers, according to a 2005 Government Accountability Office report. (Still, that is among the highest of any industry.)

But the GAO also cautions injuries and illnesses still appear to be underreported — immigrants may fear retaliation or job loss and others may be reluctant to report problems if there are financial incentives for keeping a safe workplace.

The GAO says the industry is still plenty dangerous with knife-wielding workers standing long hours on fast-moving lines and factory floors that can be dark, loud, slippery or unbearably hot or bitter cold.

The risks are many: cuts and stabbings, burns, repetitive stress injuries and amputations.

Turnover can exceed 100 percent in a year, the GAO said — a number that Boyle, the institute president, says is greatly overstated. He says meatpacking companies spend much time and money on training to ensure workers will stay.

Jose Maria Montoya lasted just a year in his first stint in a plant. He deboned meat and says the repetitive cutting motions made his hands ache so badly, he lost all sensation in his fingers.

“I didn’t say anything,” he explains. “When you need something (money) for your family, you don’t ask questions. You just do it. I don’t have many choices. I don’t speak English very well. I don’t have much education.”

His words are reminiscent of Sinclair’s days when Lithuanians, Poles and other eastern Europeans crowded into the shadow of big-city slaughterhouses in hopes of building a better life. Their schooling counted for less than a strong back, a weak nose and willingness to sweat.

The character who symbolized the struggle in “The Jungle,” was Jurgis Rudkus, a Lithuanian immigrant who endured the loss of his job and the death of his wife and son.

“The Jungle” paints the most gut-wrenching possible portrait of those desperate times. Today’s real-life meatpacking story is far from that fictional horror, but parts of the book’s message resonate in the here and now.

Thousands of immigrants still come, as they did a century ago.

Some are refugees from Somalia, Sudan and Vietnam; many more journey across the Mexican border and head to Nebraska, Kansas or other states where giant meat plants seem to have an inexhaustible need for labor.

Jose Maria Montoya left Mexico as a teen, hoping to make good money, then return home.

But after he quit meatpacking, he stayed in the Omaha area, working in a garment factory that, ironically, later moved to Mexico to take advantage of low wages. Montoya picked up new skills, learned to drive a forklift, then returned to the same meatpacking company — this time in the shipping department.

At 37, Montoya wants to start his own business making heavy-duty work uniforms.

But he has a mortgage, a stack of bills, a $12.50-an-hour wage and eight kids to feed. Though his wife works, their combined dollars only go so far.

“My dream now is for my kids,” he says. Montoya says he urges his children to study hard and become teachers and doctors, lawyers and judges. And when they whine about school, he firmly silences them:

“You have no choice,” he says. “You want to be like me and work like a donkey?”

From 1980 to 2000, the number of Hispanic workers in the meat industry — including poultry — increased more than fourfold to 35 percent, according to federal statistics, says William Kandel, a sociologist at the Economic Research Service of the Agriculture Department.

The industry is believed to have large numbers of undocumented workers — one federal official said it may be as high as one in four in meatpacking plants in Nebraska and Iowa, the GAO said, referring to its own 1998 report.

Both the meatpacking companies and the United Food and Commercial Workers union — which says it represents more than 50 percent of meat and poultry workers nationwide — have adapted to large numbers of foreign-born workers, offering, among other things, classes in English.

The union, fighting to bolster its ranks, also is making its pitch on a different landscape. In places such as Omaha, it has joined with community activists and church leaders to organize workers.

“It gives us credibility,” says Donna McDonald, president of the union’s Local 271 in Omaha. “There’s a level of comfort.”

Decades ago, meatpacking was centered in labor-friendly urban areas. But the giant stockyards of Chicago, Fort Worth and Kansas City are long gone. The industry built huge plants closer to the livestock — and in right-to-work states where unions are far less popular.

“If Sinclair were to write his book today, he would not go to Chicago. He’d go to Garden City (Kan.) or Lexington (Neb.),” says Roger Horowitz, a historian and author of three books on the industry, including “Putting Meat on the American Table.”

In the new meatpacking capitals, he says, paychecks have been shrinking. In 2004, the average annual wage for a worker in a slaughtering plant was about $25,000 — compared with $34,000 for manufacturing, according to federal figures.

Longtime workers such as Martin Cortez are stoic about the ups and downs.

At 55, he’s not about to change jobs. But he tells newcomers at the plant to get an education and do something else.

“Everybody says there’s an American dream. Some people get it. Some people don’t,” he says. “I’m not complaining. “We survive here. I don’t know how. But we do.”