



SINCLAIR'S 'THE JUNGLE' TURNS 100

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Upton Sinclair's famous novel, "The Jungle," which graphically depicts the lives of slaughterhouse workers, turns 100 this year. Still required reading for many students, the book examines issues about immigrant workers and the meat industry that remain relevant today.

Life was tough for workers in the Chicago stockyards 100 years ago. Many of the workers came from Eastern Europe and spoke little to no English. They waited in long lines hoping to be chosen for a few days work.

Inside the factory, laborers were injured regularly in the hot, bloody and greasy environment.

Back and shoulder injuries from heavy lifting and repetitive movements were common.

Among workers who handled knives Sinclair wrote that, "You could scarcely find a person who had the use of his thumb." Other workers were burnt and blinded by exposure to dangerous chemicals.

The meat factories also were unsanitary and infested with rats.

Before dying, poisoned rats would often climb into piles of meat, where they would end up in food sold to people, according to Sinclair's descriptions.

Sinclair's further graphic details of the slaughter of diseased animals, chemicals used to cover the smell of spoiled meat, and worker's using the workspace as a bathroom all led to public outrage.

Workplace improvements

The book had a dramatic effect on the food industry: domestic and foreign purchases of American meat fell by half and people began to clamor for government action.

Six months after "The Jungle" was published, Congress passed the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. These laws effectively created the Food and Drug Administration.

While the FDA continues to set and enforce standards for food production today, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is now in charge of inspecting slaughterhouses and meatpacking plants.

While it took less than a year to improve food safety, better working conditions took another 15 years.

When meat workers formed unions in the 1920s they were able to collectively bargain with company owners on bettering their working conditions.

Still the most dangerous industrial job in the country, by the early 1980s meat workers' wages were up to \$18 an hour, the highest paid for industrial work in the United States.

Extensive health benefits and retirement plans helped make the work more acceptable.

Changing workforces

But by the mid-1980s, meatpacking companies relocated their plants from urban areas like Chicago to new state-of-the-art facilities in rural locales like North Carolina, Kansas and western Nebraska, where they were able to reduce costs.

Today the meatpacking workforce is largely made up of immigrants from Latin America. Charlie LeDuff, a reporter for The New York Times, says that these workers, many undocumented or illegal, are often the only people willing to work this job.

And because they're illegal they are reluctant to unionize, afraid they'll be deported.

"For their part, many of the Mexicans ... fear that a union would place their illegal status under scrutiny and force them out," reported LeDuff, who went undercover as a meat worker in a pork plant in North Carolina.

Wages have fallen to between \$8 to \$12 an hour.

Last year, Human Rights Watch, a nonprofit organization looking to draw attention to human rights violations worldwide, issued a report criticizing the industry for increasing production at the cost of workers' health.

Working with fast-moving conveyor belts, employees must make hurried and repeated movements that make them susceptible "to constant, foreseeable and preventable risk of injury," according to Lance Compa, author of the report.

Many of the workers' injuries are not reported.

"Workers are under constant pressure from managers and supervisors not to report injuries (many managers get pay bonuses for low reporting rates), and fear losing their jobs if they report injuries. Immigrant workers especially are vulnerable to pressure not to file such reports," Compa said in an editorial, co-written with Jamie Fellner, that was published in the Washington Post.

What would Sinclair think?

The American Meat Institute, which was founded in 1906, dismisses the claims in the report, saying "wages are competitive (about \$25,000 a year), turnover is wildly exaggerated, and safety has dramatically improved."

J. Patrick Boyle, the institute's president, said in the last 15 years, the plants have invested in more power tools and better-designed work stations.

"It's a new world," he told the Associated Press. "If Upton Sinclair walked through our plants today, he'd say he was a successful reformer."

Others say even with better conditions, the meatpacking industry falls short when compared to progress made at other workplaces.

"It's a new 'Jungle,' measured not against the standard of yesterday, but the standard of today," said Lourdes Gouveia, director of the Office for Latino/Latin American Studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, according to the AP.

-- *Compiled by Bryan Hayes for NewsHour Extra*

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