

**Testimony of**  
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**Before**

**The Senate Subcommittee on Employment and Workplace Safety,**  
**Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions**

**For the Hearing on April 1, 2008**

**Regarding**

**“Serious OSHA Violations: Strategies for Breaking Dangerous Patterns”**

Thank you Chairwoman Murray, Senator Isakson, and Members of the Subcommittee for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to testify. My name is Doris Morrow. I was born and raised in a small town in Kentucky. This is my first time in Washington, D.C. and I am here today as a worker in this country to tell you and my coworkers' stories. My voice today represents the 1.3 million members of the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) and my Local 227. It is indeed an honor to be here in Washington to testify today at this important hearing.

I now live in Providence, Kentucky. I am a wife, mother of two grown children and grandmother of three grandchildren. For almost 12 years, I have worked at the Tyson Poultry plant in Robards, Kentucky. I am a "spreader" at the plant, which means I separate parts of the chicken on the line. I work with one other worker in the Individual Quick Frozen area. We stand for our entire shifts in an extremely cold environment. In my years at Tyson Robards, I have also worked in the Deboning Department with knives.

This experience has given me a first hand look at workers in poultry plants and I believe there are serious safety and health problems that must be addressed to protect workers in these plants across the country. Respiratory problems like bronchitis and pneumonia are common place given the cold temperatures in the plants. Back and muscular problems are common due to wet, icy and slippery floors and moving heavy tubs of chicken products. Sore hands, carpal tunnel and other Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSDs) are a major problem that workers face because of the rapid line speed and repetitive motion. Many of the workers in plants are afraid to complain about the work conditions because they are fearful they will lose their jobs. I am here today to speak for all these workers.

I would like to describe in more detail what it is like to work in a poultry processing plant. Let's start with the cold. Typically our work environment is extremely cold and we are standing and working in frigid temperatures for hours at a time. It is especially cold because the company has installed fans to keep condensation, a food safety problem, from building up on the ceiling and the walls of the plant. This produces an additional wind chill affect.

Every day, I wear to work three long john shirts, one long sleeve shirt, two jackets, long john pants, pants and two pairs of socks. I purchased a \$70. cover-up to wear over all these layers to try to keep myself warm. I also wear two pairs of gloves while I work. I keep an extra pair in my pocket to change into when the first pairs get too cold. By the time I am dressed with all these layers, I can barely move because of the bulk of the clothes. It is very uncomfortable to work in so many clothes and under these conditions and still be cold.

My coworkers on Line 1 have contracted frost-bite on their hands and feet. Let me say that again, my coworkers get frost-bite from working in these freezing temperatures. Sometimes we go to the sink to warm up our hands under the water or take 30 minutes to get totally warm in the bathroom. Management has complained about the time we take to warm up but we need this time to get warm again. Management gives us ten minute restroom breaks but it takes that long just to get off the production floor to the restroom. After we are warmer, we return to the freezing cold and icy floors. There is a very high rate of respiratory illnesses among my coworkers because of the climate we work in. Many workers come to work with colds and coughs because they can't take time off from work.

OSHA has come in for quick checks of the temperature in the plant but has said that it is fine. We know differently. Stand in the cold for more than a few minutes and you know what cold is. There ought to be OSHA rules about working in this kind of environment.

Another hazard of the cold temperature is the icy floors. Water, marinating ingredients and other liquids end up on the floor, making the floors slippery and icy. Although my company has put down non-skid coatings on some of the concrete floors which have helped, the liquid on the floors sometimes freezes, causing icy patches. Salt is actually spread on some of the floors to minimize the ice build-up and provide some traction for walking. Workers have slipped and fallen on these surfaces. Workers have also slipped and fallen when the floor grates, which sometimes do not fit properly, are not put back tightly after cleaning. These grates are a foot wide.

While I only work next to one other employee, in other departments many workers stand very close to one another all using sharp knives to cut the chickens. Workers are injured from repetitive motion and the rapid line speed. Workers are also injured by pushing and lifting pounds of chicken pieces along the line every hour. Many workers are injured by having to lift and stack tubs of chicken parts that weigh 70 pounds or more to skids and hoppers to be dumped. Many of these workers are actually shorter than the stack of tubs

which can reach over five and a half feet high. Lifting, removing and pushing these piles of meat can cause carpal tunnel as well as back, shoulder and neck problems.

MSDs are a continual health hazard. If you are a line worker removing bones from chicken breasts, you use one motion with your knife thousands and thousands of times a day. You steady the breast then pull the knife towards you to cut the bone free. It is not like cutting hot butter. You are actually making a cut through something that offers resistance. Perhaps not that difficult the first five times but workers are making that same cut or a similar cut 25,000 to 40,000 times a day. Without relief, you cannot do that day in and day out without injuring yourself, especially given all the other hazards surrounding you. Think about workers doing the same repetitive job for eight or nine hours a day, five or six days a week, 50 or 51 weeks a year.

Just imagine working in a freezing environment, on slippery floors, repeating the same motion and pushing pounds of meat down the line. Imagining the typical work day makes it easy to understand why workers' wrists and hands, their elbows and shoulders, and their backs and legs show the wear and tear in very painful injuries. In my plant, we process between 150,000 and 250,000 chickens a day.

Working at a poultry plant is hard work. But hard work should not be unsafe work. I am one of the lucky people in the poultry industry. I have a union that provides safety training and support for its members. We have a safety committee whose members include workers that work with management to correct unsafe conditions.

A safe plant takes day in and day out attention. With the union, we have that. The union has to be constantly vigilant. We need to watch every day. It is an ongoing battle. In non-union plants, that simply doesn't happen.

Without the support of the employers and the government, workers are injured every day. I have seen first hand my coworkers' injuries. I know two coworkers with crippling injuries from working in the poultry plants. I know another coworker who was so severely injured that she had to work in the supply room for over a year because of her injury.

Like I said, I'm lucky because I work in a union plant. Having a union in our plant means that workers can avoid a lot of these injuries. The union has been great for me and my coworkers. We have someone fighting for us. When I first started working at this plant, it was a non-union plant. I know first-hand the difference between a non-union plant when people are too afraid to speak up and a plant where we can turn to the union when we see problems, including safety problems. But there are two problems that still exist – the number of unionized plants in the U.S. and the total lack of real government intervention in the safety and health of workers in this country.

Only 30 percent of poultry plants in the country have a union.

The 70 percent of the plants without a union have the power to set the standards especially given the lax government intervention that exists today. These non-union plants bring everyone down to their level. And that level causes workers to suffer injuries that are preventable.

My union, the UFCW, has monitored some of these non-union plants and has found broken or missing safety equipment and unguarded blades, unbelievably fast line speeds, excessively long work days, tiled floors with no traction when they are wet, factories with no emergency lighting to provide illumination to get out of messy and dangerous plants when there are power outages, ammonia leaks, and limited or no safety training or any training for employees. There are so many hazards at these plants that when workers, who are often afraid to complain for fear of losing their jobs, do complain they are often ignored. If workers go to the health centers with injuries, they are given icepacks, ibuprofen or ointment to take care of the problem and are then sent back to work.

UFCW has always fought to prevent worker injuries. The union began working specifically on repetitive stress injuries in the 1980s. We worked with Senator Dole when she was Secretary of Labor to begin developing an OSHA ergonomic standard. After ten years of work and scientific analysis we got an ergonomics standard for workers. But when President Bush took office, he had the standard repealed. Due to the lack of OSHA enforcement for ergonomics, workers are once again suffering high rates of injuries. Repealing this crucial standard was only the first backwards step in protecting workers.

A lot of management in the poultry industry will say that injuries are not real. Management will argue that repetitive stress injuries don't happen at work. They say that they happen at home. But I am here to tell you the truth. Nothing we do at home requires that kind of repetition like we do at work – making 40,000 cuts in a single shift. Workplace ergonomic hazards are injuring and crippling workers. Changes in job station and work design can prevent these injuries. My employer has made some changes to Line 3 at my plant but more are needed. It is time to demand that the government and companies protect workers and prevent these injuries.

Management will also tell you that they have to keep our work stations so cold to keep the condensation from forming on the plant's ceiling. Clearly, I do not have to work in a refrigerator to produce safe food for consumers. Having almost 180 workers call in sick in one day is a clear sign that something is wrong in these plants. It is time to turn the thermostats up to protect the workers.

Management will tell you that they try to keep the floors clean and dry but that is simply not always the case. One worker injury on a wet and icy floor is one too many. Too many workers are getting injured by falling on the floors. More can be done to the floors to prevent these injuries.

I have seen first hand the problems in poultry plants. I have seen first hand the injuries of my coworkers. I know there are things we can do to make our workplaces safer. It is time that we think about the workers and protect us from these safety and health hazards.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today and tell you the stories of workers in poultry plants across this country. I urge you to use the power of your offices to help the workers who provide the food for this nation by protecting our safety and health at work. Again, thank you for your time and I would be pleased to answer any questions that you may have.