



WORKING TO THE BONE:

THE EXPERIENCES OF MIGRANT WORKERS
IN THE MEAT SECTOR IN IRELAND



The Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI) is a national organisation working to promote the rights of migrant workers and their families at risk of exploitation, social exclusion and discrimination. We believe people should be able to move in safety and work with dignity.

Since 2001, MRCI has been working with migrant workers in unregulated and precarious employment - low pay, poor working conditions, with precarious immigration status, and have brought into public view exploitation, discrimination and poor enforcement. During recent years, and particularly since Covid-19, we have been supporting essential workers specifically from the agriculture and food sector to speak out and fight for overdue change in their working conditions.

MRCI combines frontline support, strategic casework, and policy, advocacy and campaigning work to achieve long-lasting change. Our focus on collective action, organisation, and innovation is designed to build stronger communities, better workplaces, and a fairer society for all.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the workers who completed this survey and a special thank you to those workers who spread the word about the research and encouraged and enabled others to speak out and share their stories, some for the first time.



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This publication is available at www.mrci.ie

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INTRODUCTION

Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI) has been supporting agri-food workers to address workplace issues since its inception in 2001. MRCI supports workers with an average of 2,200 cases annually across agri-food, home care, cleaning, hotel, restaurants and catering, and on a range of work permit and immigration issues.

For the past two years, this work has focused on building capacity among meat processing workers to challenge poor workplace practice and providing a platform for workers to voice their concerns and issues. Since 2018, we have supported people with one-to-one casework, provided information sessions on employment rights, and delivered webinars on health and safety.

Workers in the meat processing sector were some of the hardest hit by Covid-19 outbreaks, with over 10% of the workforce contracting the virus¹. The pandemic has laid bare the historically poor working conditions for these essential workers alongside the consistent shortcomings of institutions set up to protect them. It also exposed legislative barriers in accessing social protection, including sick pay.

This research reveals the systemic culture of poor and dangerous working conditions, with employers who put profit before the health and safety of their workers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research draws on the results of a survey conducted with 151 workers from the meat processing sector in Ireland.


MRCI held one-to-one and group sessions with workers across several counties to input

into design, content, and purpose of the research. Our methodology was developed to enable workers to overcome barriers often experienced when raising concerns. Barriers include a culture of fear in speaking out and fear of reprisals, including loss of employment and the loss of immigration status; exhaustion from working long hours; language accessibility; and a mistrust of authorities and institutions as a result of systemic failures to protect workers. **FOR MANY MEAT FACTORY WORKERS, THIS IS THE VERY FIRST TIME THEY HAVE SPOKEN OUT ABOUT THE CONDITIONS THEY ARE FACING.**

The survey was anonymous and structured in five parts. It covered workers' experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic but primarily focused on their current and historical working conditions. It was translated into Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Brazilian Portuguese, Romanian and Russian to improve accessibility and accuracy in responses.

MRCI developed relationships with leaders and gatekeepers in worker communities to roll out the survey directly worker-to-worker. It opened in early July 2020, closed in early October 2020, and was not advertised publicly via social media or through newsletters to ensure its integrity and the verification of responses. The survey was conducted via Survey Monkey and entries were limited to one IP address per survey completion.

The survey results are complemented by desk research and a series of case studies drawn from in-depth interviews to further illustrate the findings and share the human stories behind the figures. All quotes are direct quotes from workers from the research; we have removed names and identifying details to ensure anonymity. A final session was held with workers on the research findings to inform the recommendations of this report.



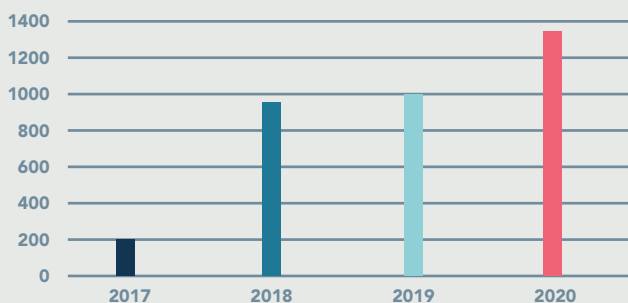
MEAT PROCESSING AND PRODUCTION SECTOR

SECTOR DATA

To understand the industry it is important to know who works in it. There are generally limitations in publically available data collected on the participation of migrants in the labour market, including the meat sector.

Special tabulation Census Data 2016 shows 12,413 people are employed in meat production, processing and preserving of meat. 52% are Irish Nationals and 42% are migrant workers. 77% are male and 23% female. 57% of the total workforce are aged between 25-44 years².

In 2017, employment permits were issued to meat processing companies³. Permits continued to be issued at an increasing rate into 2018 and 2019. In 2020, throughout Covid-19 the largest number of permits issued to the sector (n=520 April-September).



The graph above shows 187 employment permits issued in 2017, 979 in 2018, 1,010 in 2019, and 1,323 issued from January to September 2020. A total of 3,382, excluding renewals (2017 – 2019; n.117)⁴.

Combining CSO 2016 data and employment permits data reveals a total number of **15,795** workers in this sector. The data shows the **migrant workforce in this sector accounts for 59%**. Of this 56% are EU workers and 44% are non-EU workers. 21% of the workforce are on employment permits.

It is important to note that the figures above will most likely not include undocumented migrants who also work in this sector, and are

particularly vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination.

The main nationalities are Botswanan, Brazilian, Chinese, Filipino, Latvian, Lithuanian, Moldovan, Polish, Romanian, Slovakian, South African, and Ukrainian. EU and non-EU workers are overrepresented in positions on factory floors and in low-paid positions.


AGENCY WORKERS

An emerging feature of employment in Ireland are EU-workers employed through agencies rather than directly by meat processing companies. Companies are able to deflect responsibility onto agencies and vice versa, leaving the worker with uncertainty over where to raise concerns or access their rights. Agency workers regularly have a loss of income in comparison to their colleagues directly employed with factories. We also heard reports of agency workers living in agency-owned accommodation and being threatened with eviction if they complain about working conditions or the lack of health and safety measures.

The Independent Workers Union exposed an agency who were asking workers to sign bogus self-employment contracts in Poland, meaning workers faced significant barriers in accessing their rights. SIPTU suggests that up to 30% of meat workers could be employed through agencies⁵. Given the systemic issues in the sector, use of agencies further displaces responsibility away from employers and limits workers from asserting their rights and needs to be urgently addressed.

MEAT PROCESSING SECTOR

According to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) the meat sector has an annual **export value of €3.9 billion**, with Ireland being the fifth largest net exporter of beef in the world⁶. Ireland's gross indigenous production (GIP)⁷ for 2017 - 2019 was on average 1.2 million tonnes per year⁸. This is a high-value sector to the



economy and has considerable concentration among a few key employers.

Irish Labour shortages in agri-food saw the introduction of quotas for employment permits in 2018 across horticulture, dairy and meat processing. In meat processing, **pay rates ranged from €10.85 to €13.56** for general operatives and de-boners respectively⁹.

Structural features, for example, a focus on value-added generation which relies on low wages to make a profit, and a poor track record of engaging with or recognising Trade Unions arguably make it a sector less inclined to invest in their workforce. This research shows that workers feel they are disposable and reveals a culture of oppression, poor pay and poor health and safety standards.

WORKFORCE SUSTAINABILITY

The EU Farm to Fork Strategy launched in May 2020 sets out to make EU food systems fair, healthy, and environmentally-friendly. The strategy makes welcome reference to the critical importance of agri-food workers, and particularly vulnerable workers. It outlines the need to ensure that “key principles enshrined in the European Pillar of Social Rights are respected, especially when it comes to precarious, seasonal and undeclared workers. The considerations of workers’ social protection, working and housing conditions as well as protection of health and safety will play a major role in building fair, strong and sustainable food systems”¹⁰.

Ireland’s Food Wise 2025 sets out a ten year plan for the agri-food sector. Growth projections for the sector are ambitious, with a projected increase of 85% in the value of agri-food exports, and 23,000 additional jobs. The plan references the need for attraction, retention, and development of talent throughout the supply chain¹¹. Yet it makes little reference to essential jobs or labour migration and gives no assurances on safeguards for workers across the industry.

In fact, workers voices and concerns remain absent from the Agri-Food Strategy 2030 Stakeholder Committee and the Beef Taskforce. It is clear that there has been a total lack of regard from successive Ministers for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and DAFM on the impact of their strategies on workers, including migrant workers. Any EU and government subsidies across the agri-food chain must have due regard to the treatment of workers.

ANIMAL KILL RATE

Despite Covid-19, kill rates have increased in 2020 from 2019 by 45,350 animals at the end of October 2020, with average monthly kill rates on par with those in 2018. At the end of October 2020, average kill rates per week were 34,142, 33,112 in 2019 and 34,412 for 2018. In 2020, by end of October, 1.5 million animals had been killed. While kill rates dropped in April and May due to the initial impact of Covid-19, these have now almost caught up to 2018 levels and have surpassed 2019 rates despite Covid-19 clusters that emerged in July and August.

Validated by these statistics, many workers have told MRCI that lines only temporarily slowed and are now back to fast, and in many cases, increased levels of production. Driven by export value, this level of production has no doubt contributed to clusters in meat factories, arguably putting workers lives at risk in the pursuit of profit. Workers tell MRCI that they are being asked to physically distance without the space to do so, and that they continue to work shoulder-to-shoulder to meet production demands. It does not seem possible to match 2018 and exceed 2019 production levels, while comprehensively protecting workers at the same time.

“FOR ME, ALL THEY JUST CARE ABOUT IS MONEY, THAT’S ALL THEY CARE ABOUT... HOW MANY CATTLE COMES THROUGH THOSE GATES. THEY DON’T CARE ABOUT THE PEOPLE’S SAFETY. THE PEOPLE’S HEALTH”



STATUTORY OVERSIGHT

Covid-19 exposed the failure of several state institutions and agencies to protect workers and enforce laws and standards. Regulation and enforcement of the meat sector is complex and cuts across DAFM, the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (DBEI), and the Department of Health (DOH). While the meat sector is a highly-regulated industry with regards to food safety, it is poorly regulated in terms of the working conditions of its employees. It is important to note that statutory agencies need to be de-coupled from immigration enforcement to ensure workers can come forward in confidence and not fear reprisals.

HEALTH AND SAFETY AUTHORITY

The remit of the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) is to enforce Safety, Health and Welfare at work. In 2018 there was a 17.2% injury rate in manufacturing, with two fatalities¹². The most common working environment in non-fatal accidents in 2018 was the production area, factory or workshop, with 27.1% of workers injured¹³. This statistic is wholly inconsistent with this research and raises serious concerns about under-reporting and investigation. It is deeply concerning that few or no breaches have been detected, and that prosecutions are limited and fines low, for example a €2,000 fine for loss of an eye in 2016¹⁴.

Of note is the absence of any specific safety guidelines for meat factory workers. The HSA has guidance on farm safety and on the safe handling of livestock on farms and at marts and lairages¹⁵. The Food Safety Authority have a long list of requirements for food safety at slaughterhouses¹⁶. Overall, the lack of a focus on the manufacturing sector shows a huge gap in this area. An urgent review is needed as to why injuries continue to be prevalent yet are an unaddressed feature of workers' lives. Specific guidelines on workers' health and safety particularly in meat processing need to be developed with workers, along with a suite of enforcement practices.

WORKPLACE RELATIONS COMMISSION INSPECTORS


Inspectors visit places of employment and carry out investigations by way of checking records, to ensure compliance with equality and employment-related legislation. Under the employment permits quotas, inspectors were additionally tasked with inspecting access to training and suitable accommodation for meat factory workers. Historical data on WRC inspections in the meat sector is limited and not disaggregated, with the exception of 2019¹⁷.

Since January 2019, 17 employers associated with meat processing have been inspected. In six of these cases contraventions of legislation were detected and three were approved for prosecution, with enquiries ongoing in the other three cases. According to the WRC no breaches of the language or accommodation conditions have been detected¹⁸.

LABOUR MIGRATION

Labour migration has been and continues to be extremely positive for Ireland. Maintaining and expanding legal routes for migration is of utmost importance in a globalised world. However the balance of power in Ireland's current guest-worker model continues to favour employers over workers. Employees on employment permits find it significantly more difficult to assert and claim their rights. Workers report to us they cannot choose not to come to work if ill, or seek improved conditions for fear of losing their employment permit and immigration status¹⁹.

MRCI has long been calling for reform of the work permits system to give better rights to workers, including full mobility to enable people to change jobs easily, along with immediate access to family reunification rights, and access to the labour market for de-facto partners and spouses²⁰. This is an area that needs serious and urgent attention.



RESEARCH FINDINGS

RESPONDENT OVERVIEW

The survey heard from people with the following nationalities: American, Belarusian, Botswanan, Brazilian, Bulgarian, Chinese, Estonian, Filipino, Georgian, Hungarian, Irish, Latvian, Lithuanian, Macedonian, Moldovan, Nigerian, Polish, Romanian, Russian, South African, and Ukrainian.

Immigration status:

- 29% are on Stamp 1 (Employment Permits)
- 19% were EU citizens
- 14% are on Stamp 4
- 14% are naturalised Irish Citizens
- 1% are undocumented
- 23% did not disclose their immigration status

Out of 151 respondents, 87 were male, 30 female, and 34 did not disclose. The majority of the respondents are not members of trade unions.

Workers who completed the survey are employed by all the major meat processing companies (80%) as well as several smaller companies and subsidiaries (10%), and via agencies (10%). These include poultry and pork factories, however, the majority of those surveyed work in beef processing.

- 62% of workers surveyed have worked in the sector in Ireland for 4 years or less;
- 21% have worked between 5 and 15 years in the sector;
- 17% have worked for more than 15 years.

We heard from De-boners (40%), Cutters and Trimmers (18%), Kill Line Operators (13%), Packing Hall Operators (14%), Chill Room Operatives (3%), Cleaners (3%) amongst other roles including Supervisors, Storage, Dispatch and Warehousing, Lairage, and Inspection/Quality Control.

The location of workers surveyed include: Cavan, Cork, Kildare, Laois, Limerick, Longford, Mayo, Meath, Monaghan, Offaly, Roscommon, Waterford, and Westmeath.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

"Too much work with no breaks, line is too fast, quota too high"

"Heavy weights, overwork"

"Repetitive and heavy work"

"Slippery surface"

"Wet floors"

"They don't care about the workers' health"

"Health and safety was a big concern way before Covid"

"They should worry more about health [of workers] then the production"

"There is no health and safety"

"No health and safety"

"Health and safety is terrible"

"The employer does not value our health"

"I am afraid of the damage to my mental and physical health"

"We need more safety protection"

"They need to take a serious approach to safety"

"Unbearable working conditions, low level of safety"

Poor Health and safety conditions, policies, and practice was a central theme in the research results. **ALMOST 60% OF THE WORKERS SURVEYED SAID THEY HAD BEEN INJURED WHILST WORKING AT A MEAT PLANT IN IRELAND.**

This includes regular (sometimes daily) lacerations and bruises as well as repetitive strain and chronic back pain. People have also experienced skin disorders, eye injuries, bone fractures, loss of fingers and limbs, burns, and respiratory problems.

Workers explained that these injuries occur because of faulty tools or machinery; none or limited training on health and safety or on how to use equipments properly; lack of protective



measures or equipment; exposure to toxic chemicals; high noise levels.

- 62% of workers said they had not received enough training when they started their jobs;
- 58% of workers didn't know who the Health and Safety Officer was;
- Sadly a fifth of all respondents said that injuries were an expected occupational hazard.

Although the majority of workers say that these injuries were reported, several workers told MRCI that incidents are often recorded as less serious, and others mentioned that their injuries were recorded as happening outside of the workplace. For most of the workers MRCI has spoken to, nothing has been done to mitigate against future injury, such as implementing more effective training programs for new starters.

"AFTER YEARS WORKING IN THE SAME LINE, THE SAME POSITION DAY-IN DAY-OUT, THAT'S WHY YOU GET SUCH BAD BACK PAIN".

"FOR INSTANCE, NEW PEOPLE DON'T GET NO TRAINING –NO TRAINING WITH THE KNIFE, OR SAFETY TIPS ON HOW TO USE A KNIFE. THAT'S THE MOST DANGEROUS".

"MOST OF THE TIME IF PEOPLE ARE WORKING ON MACHINERY, THEY ARE NOT BEING TRAINED – THERE'S NO GUIDELINES ON THE MACHINERY ON WHAT THE OPERATOR MUST DO".

"IF SOMEONE GETS INJURED AT WORK, THERE IS NO AMBULANCE OR WORK VEHICLE – WHAT THEY DO IS THEY'LL GET SOMEONE, ANOTHER WORKER, TO TAKE YOU TO THE HOSPITAL, BUT THAT PERSON IS NOT LICENSED TO TAKE YOU – SHOULD ANYTHING HAPPEN TO YOU IN THAT VEHICLE WHO IS RESPONSIBLE? NOT THE COMPANY".

This rate of injury is not reflected in Health and Safety data or prosecutions against meat processing plant employers. Considering this research has been generated from across thirteen counties, it is apparent that there are structural issues in this sector, gaps in

statutory oversight, and that employers are not prioritising workers' safety.

CASE STUDY - ANTONIO

"The health and safety is terrible. The weight of the animal is too heavy for one person here in Ireland. In South America, the cows are lighter – when we ask for someone to help us lift it, we're told no and shouted at. My wrists are really damaged from this.

I see people who have worked for years in these factories and are getting older, and I see the management giving them the work of three workers, trying to say they're not able for the work anymore, trying to make them resign and putting their safety at risk.


Also, the teeth of the saw should be changed every day, but sometimes they're only changed every 10 days. In Brazil, we had a safety briefing every morning – guidance on what the working day is going to be like and what health and safety will be required. But nothing like that exists here."


There is a long-term cost for workers in the repetitive and difficult nature of this work. Workers are treated as disposable, and there is a direct correlation between feeling replaceable and being afraid to speak out and lose your job and immigration status. The lack of effective statutory oversight and long-term investment in the wellbeing of workers will impact on Ireland's healthcare and other services in the long term. The system enables Ireland to work people to the bone who have come here for better opportunities for themselves and their families. As some people will return to their home countries, it is these countries who will have to foot the bill for long-term illness, or in cases where healthcare is limited, life expectancy could be reduced.

SICK PAY

ACCORDING TO OUR RESEARCH, 90% OF MEAT PROCESSING COMPANIES DO NOT OFFER SICK PAY TO THEIR WORKERS IN THE EVENT OF INJURY OR ILLNESS.

In low-wage roles, people rely on their income to pay for essentials like rent and food. The lack of legal requirement for employers to provide sick





pay puts pressure on workers to return to work before they have fully recovered putting themselves and their colleagues at risk.

Covid-19 has exposed Ireland's inadequate protection of workers in the event of illness or injury. Research shows a correlation between sick pay entitlements and a reduction in injuries at work²¹. Sick pay is therefore vital in this sector and should not be at the discretion of the employer. The introduction of mandatory and generous sick pay in Ireland without income level or time qualifiers will deliver better outcomes for people and workplaces.

"WE WORK FOR OUR LIVELIHOOD AND WE ARE GOOD FOR THE COMPANY, BUT WHEN WE GET HURT WE ARE NOT SUPPORTED BY THE COMPANY, WHICH LEAVES US AND OUR LIVELIHOODS UNPROTECTED".

WORKING CONDITIONS AND EXPLOITATION

WAGES

Many workers commented on the issue of wages during the research, with many feeling the low wages do not equate with the difficult and demanding nature of the work. Workers also disclosed frustration at the pay disparity between permit and non-permit holders doing the same jobs, but for longer periods.

Our research shows that the wages for the main roles range from:

- De-boners: €10.10 - €21.00, with an average of €13.68 per hour
- Trimmers: €10.10 - €14.50, with an average of €11.96 per hour
- Kill Line Operators: €10.10 - €15.50, with an average of €11.27 per hour
- Packing Hall Operators: €10.10 - €12.00, with an average of €10.74 per hour

Several people in each of these roles, alongside Cleaners and Chill Room Operatives, stated they earned less than the minimum wage per hour. 28% of the workers on the lowest salaries (€12.00 and below) confirmed that EU workers, doing the

same jobs, have been working for between 4 to 15 years, and a further 11% have been working more than 15 years in the sector. The research also are generally on minimum wage.

Several workers also revealed that they were on General Operative employment permits (€22,000) but were doing the work of De-boners (€27,500).

Several undocumented workers revealed to MRCI that they had been on less than minimum wage for up to eight years, highlighting that people without papers are vulnerable to abuse by unscrupulous employers.

CONTRACTS

17% of respondents stated that their contracts do not reflect their current terms and conditions; 10% said they weren't sure if they had a contract; and 14% said they did not have a contract.

HOURS PER WEEK

56% of workers said they work more than 40 hours per week, with some stating they work more than 55 hours each week.


27% said they are not paid extra if they work overtime. 79% said they do not receive a paid bonus on top of their normal wages, for example, if they have a higher rate of production.

"THE SPEED OF THE LINE HAS TO CHANGE. DE-BONERS WHO ARE PAID PER KILO ARE UNDER PRESSURE TO MAKE THE PRODUCTION LINE GO FAST BUT FOR US PACKERS, NOTHING. YOU HAVE TO BE A ROBOT TO CATCH UP WITH THE SPEED BUT WHEN YOU ARE SICK WITH SEVERE BACK PAIN AND MUSCLE ACHES THERE IS NO SICK PAY."

PRODUCTION LEVELS

"WHEN THE FACTORY NEEDS TO KILL 500 COWS, IF PEOPLE DON'T SHOW UP WE STILL HAVE TO MEET THAT TARGET - THEY GET IN INEXPERIENCED PEOPLE AND THERE'S LOADS OF ACCIDENTS AS A RESULT".

Workers revealed through the research that they feel under pressure to work at unreasonable and unsafe speeds, putting their and their colleagues' health and safety at risk. One production line worker said



“working conditions in the company are completely inhumane, a work system was implemented so there is a team that works on production, so two people [boners]... have a minute and a half to bone a whole forehead... this has 4 smaller pieces to clean, so adding the 2 forehead pieces together, means that I have 8 pieces every 3 minutes at my table for me to clean. I have to do this myself, this is inhumane.”

“THE PRODUCTION HAS BEEN UP AND WE DON'T HAVE TIME FOR OUR FAMILIES - SOME PEOPLE WORK FROM 6AM TO 8 OR 9PM; FROM MONDAY TO SATURDAY, SOME PEOPLE EVEN TO SUNDAY. WE JUST WANT TO HAVE SOME TIME TO SPEND WITH OUR FAMILIES”

Access to toilet breaks have emerged as a key theme through our one-to-one interviews and case studies.

“MANAGEMENT HAS ZERO RESPECT FOR US - THEY WANT PEOPLE'S PRODUCTION TO BE BEYOND THEIR CAPACITY. WE ONLY GET A FEW 10 MINUTE BREAKS MAXIMUM ACROSS THE DAY, AND WHEN PEOPLE GO TO THE TOILET YOU CAN SEE THEM RUNNING TO GET BACK TO THEIR STATION”.

“I WAS HUMILIATED BY MY SUPERVISOR, BECAUSE I WANTED TO GO TO THE TOILET AND HE TOLD ME TO WAIT FIVE MINUTES, THEN AFTER 30 MINUTES I COULDN'T HOLD ON ANYMORE AND WENT TO THE BATHROOM”.

BULLYING, DISCRIMINATION,

AND PROGRESSION

BULLYING

When asked if people had felt bullied at work²², respondents told us that:

- 43% felt verbally bullied
- 11% felt physically bullied
- 18% felt socially bullied
- 35% felt psychologically bullied

Of those who felt bullied, 63% did not report it, with 26% stating that they were too afraid to raise their concerns. Of the 37% that did report it, a staggering **96% said their employer did not take effective action.**

CASE STUDY — PAULO

“I’ve been working in meat for 8 years. My whole family has worked in meat in my home country. Before I started this job, I became undocumented and because of this I feel like I cannot speak out at work or change my situation. Undocumented workers face more discrimination - we’re made to stay late, do extra cleaning, and lift heavier weights. We’re often told “if you find it hard, pack your things and go home”. I’m only paid €9 an hour. The conditions have sent me into a depression, my manager bullies me all day long – yelling horrible things at me all day long. Only my faith and family have kept me going”

It is evident that meat factory floors are workplaces where threats, insults, and intimidation are commonplace. People on work permits are subject to even further bullying as they are threatened with deportation and with the loss of their employment and as a result immigration status, with undocumented workers receiving even worse treatment. It is also clear that reporting and management are structured to enable this culture of bullying.

“WE SUFFER RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION, ALL OF THE TIME WE ARE FORCED TO DO THE WORST AND HEAVIEST WORK BECAUSE WE ARE MIGRANTS AND DON'T HAVE ACCESS TO RIGHTS AND BECAUSE WE DON'T SPEAK ENGLISH”.

RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

With regards to discrimination, 62% said they have felt discriminated against with the majority citing nationality and race/ethnic background as the reason. Several also mentioned that they felt discriminated against on their gender, age, and religion.

Similarly to bullying, 61% did not report this, with 19% stating they felt too afraid to raise their concerns. And again 96% felt their employer did not take any action after it was reported.

This indicates that systemic racism is prevalent in this sector. As we have seen across the world, racism has a devastating impact on people's lives and has no place at work. Everyone should have the right to live and work free from fear and oppression.

"MY COLLEAGUE CALLED ME...MONKEY AND MADE COMMENTS ABOUT THE COLOUR OF MY SKIN. I DECIDED TO SPEAK TO MANAGEMENT. THE MANAGER DECIDED TO WARN MY WORK COLLEAGUE BUT SAID, SARCASTICALLY, WHY DID I STRESS MYSELF WITH IT SEEING THAT I WASN'T SO BLACK (SO DARK), THEN HE SMIRKED".

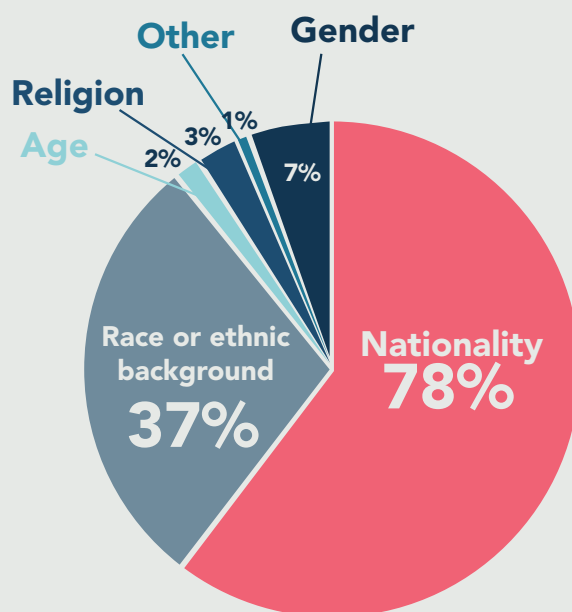
PROGRESSION

"A PERSON NEEDS TO HAVE SOMETHING TO SHOW FOR THEIR YEARS OF WORK, SOMETHING THEY CAN BE PROUD OF, - SOMETHING THEY CAN SHOW THEIR CHILDREN".

87% of workers said that they had not had the opportunity to progress or be promoted since starting in their workplace. 18% of these respondents have worked for their employers for over 15 years; with a further 19% having worked in the same places from 6 to 15 years.

NOT A SINGLE WORKER SURVEYED SAID THEY FELT VALUED AT WORK.


The research shows a culture of oppression, low wage work, poor health and safety standards, exploitative conditions, despite years of experience in the sector.



HOUSING

The majority of our respondents (69%) do not live in shared accommodation with co-workers, and of those that do, the majority live with 4 or fewer co-workers. Just five said they shared a bedroom. From our findings, there is a decidedly mixed picture when it comes to housing. Homes range from single occupant to shared rentals to family-owned homes.

Since the Covid-19 clusters in meat processing plants hit the media, there has been a focus on the living conditions of workers. Although it is important to consider the wider context when working to prevent the spread of the virus, this spotlight unduly blames workers for their living conditions (which are often determined by low wages and other factors such as those living in direct provision) and deflects responsibility away from the employers around their safety in the workplace.



CASE STUDY – FRANCISCO

"I got sick from Covid and was off for 15 days. I know I got it at work; nearly half of the people working there got sick. The production never stopped and the people left behind had to work twice as hard to maintain the output level. The company did not give us sick pay.

There are 6 workers living in my house. Two of us got Covid and the others had to quarantine too. We didn't want to give it to them so we had a rota with slotted times to use the kitchen and bathroom. It was a really hard time for us all. I only got my social welfare payment after 40 days, so I was at home not being paid and worrying about my rent.

I don't feel valued at all. Everyone is treated the same way – just as bad. They really don't care about us."

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

"THEY ONLY PUT SOME MEASURES IN 1 MONTH AFTER COVID HIT, AND THEY DIDN'T ENFORCE THEM OR GIVE US ANY INFORMATION WE COULD UNDERSTAND".

"I BEGAN TO EAT LUNCH IN MY CAR BECAUSE I DIDN'T FEEL SAFE IN THE CANTEEN. WE'RE TOLD TO SOCIALLY DISTANCE BUT THERE IS NO SPACE TO DISTANCE".

People working to get vital food into our homes during this crisis deserved to have employers and a government that prioritised their safety and mitigated their exposure to Covid-19.

The meat sector was deemed essential, however unlike other sectors, it remained open without any risk assessment to find out whether the factories would be safe environments for people to work in. Late guidelines for the sector, inconsistent approaches by employers in implementing health and safety measures, and a lack of unannounced inspections by the HSA meant unnecessary exposure for workers and local communities to the virus.

At the time of publication, there have been 52 outbreaks at meat plants accounting for 1768 cases with 38 workers hospitalised, and 11 in ICU²³.


"IF THE DISEASE WAS IN THE ANIMALS, THEY'D HAVE TO CLOSE THE PLACE. BUT FOR THE WORKERS, THE FACTORIES CAN DO WHAT THEY WANT".

"I'M SO ANGRY – HOW CAN A GOVERNMENT ALLOW THIS? THEY FORGOT ABOUT US, THEY DID NOT CARE. IT'S SHOCKING".

Many workers say that they still do not feel safe at work and that there has been a back slide in Covid-19 health and safety measures. They say they are being told to physically distance on the factory floor in areas where it is not possible to do so, especially when production targets remain so high. Workers also tell us that there is almost no physical distancing in shared spaces such as canteens, changing areas, or toilets, and that un-staggered shift changes expose them unnecessarily to the virus.

The Covid-19 pandemic has meant that essential workers in the meat processing sector have had to face even poorer working conditions putting themselves at risk. Too much responsibility was given to a sector who have demonstrated time and time again that it does not prioritise the wellbeing of their workforce. The overall feeling from the research respondents is that employers did not put in place sufficient measures to keep their workforce safe.

WHAT THIS RESEARCH SHOWS IS THAT MANY OF THE FAILINGS THAT ENABLED THE VIRUS TO SPREAD EXISTED LONG BEFORE THE VIRUS TOOK HOLD.





CONCLUSION

The meat processing sector is characterised by dirty, difficult, and dangerous work where poor health and safety practices show a cavalier disregard for the people who work there. Excessive levels of production for available capacity put undue pressure on workers to process and package meat at unsustainable rates.


This research demonstrates that state institutions have failed and continue to fail workers. An urgent review and action is required of statutory bodies tasked with protecting workers in such a difficult and dangerous sector. Workers and their representatives need to be included in discussions on the future of the agri-food sector and sustainability.

MRCI has long been calling for the urgent reform of the Employment Permit system. Maintaining and expanding legal routes for migration is of utmost importance in a globalised world. However the current set up provides employers with too much power. Improvements need to be made to enable workers to change employer, allow for mobility, and as a result, hold employers to account and reduce exploitation.

Sick pay should not be at the discretion of the employer, and should be a guaranteed right for anyone working in Ireland. Legislative change that introduces comprehensive and compulsory national employer sick pay without income level or time qualifiers are urgent.

The systemic racism and discrimination prevalent in this sector must be addressed head on. This sector relies on low wages to make a profit and needs to change to invest in the long-term health and safety of its workforce. There needs to be greater transparency around the sectoral profits and re-investment in the workplace and workforce.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the structural and historical issues endemic in the meat sector. The mistreatment of migrant workers has become a source of national shame. We must use this opportunity as a catalyst for long overdue change.





RECOMMENDATIONS

DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS, ENTERPRISE AND INNOVATION

Labour Migration

1. Introduce **mobility for all employment permit holders**, similar to those already in place for Critical Skills Permit holders, to meet labour market needs, improve conditions in low-paid sectors, and allow long-term progression.

Inspection and Enforcement

2. Increase the capacity of the Health and Safety Authority to better investigate and enforce breaches via unannounced inspections, and prioritise speaking to workers anonymously and in a language they can understand about their experiences, and shut down workplaces on the spot if deemed necessary.

3. For the Health and Safety Authority to develop sector specific guidelines for workers in meat factories, taking into account kill and production rates to and worker ratios, with a requirement for a Health and Safety Officer for each section of a meat processing plant.

4. For the Workplace Relations Commission Inspectors, to carry out a targeted programme of inspections in meat factories, who prioritise speaking to workers anonymously and in a language they can understand about their experiences, and with a non-punitive approach to employees who may be undocumented.

Terms and Conditions

5. Ensure the direct experiences of workers are included in the development of sick pay legislation, and that income level or time qualifiers do not apply.

6. Workers need a pay raise for the essential and hazardous work they are performing. Commit to ensuing Trade Union recognition and to full collective bargaining rights for workers.

7. Tackle bogus self-employment and recruitment agencies that pay workers outside of the jurisdiction.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL, FOOD AND THE MARINE

Representation + Sustainability

1. Ensure Ireland's Agri-Food Strategy 2030, prioritises treatment and rights of workers with a focus on a Just Transition Framework. Include worker and community group representatives in the Agri-Food Strategy 2030 Stakeholder Committee.

2. Invite worker and community group representatives onto the Beef Taskforce to bring a focus on worker rights

Oversight and Enforcement

3. Widen the remit of the National Food Ombudsman to include worker rights and working conditions.

4. Develop new sectoral indicators to protect workers, including assessment of output and exports; numbers of weekly slaughtered animals; the number of workers on the factory floor; number of worker by section - such as the kill line and packing halls - at any one time.


DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

1. Immediate **mandatory close for two weeks of plants with live clusters** (under current Health and Safety Legislation), with workers on full pay, a subsequent deep clean with a phased re-opening overseen by the HSA and HSE.

2. Ensure a robust system of interpretation for workers throughout recurring testing and contact tracing.

3. Ensure employers carry out paid training on new protocols with worker in the workplace in a language they can understand paid for by employers and monitored by the state.

4. Ensure meat factory workers are prioritised and included in plans for the roll out of the COVID-19 vaccine





POLITICAL OVERSIGHT


The majority of recommendations set out above fall between two separate Government departments – DBEI and DAFM, yet are intersecting in nature. This is mirrored in recommendations made in the final report of the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response²⁴. The intersectionality and complexity of this sector means that political oversight is necessary to bring about greater transparency, examine workforce planning, worker and farmer rights, agri-food strategy and sustainability.

Establish a **Joint Sub-Committee made up of members from the Business Committee and the Committee on Agricultural, and the Marine;** this joint sub-committee would oversee implementation of recommendations of Special Committee on Covid-19 and recommendations from this report and further examine:

- a) Agri-food policy, sectoral profits and worker rights
- b) Terms and conditions for workers
- c) Labour migration and employment permits
- d) Poor health and safety practices
- e) Bullying, racism and discrimination in the workplace
- f) Recruitment agencies and bogus self-employment
- g) Inspection and enforcement
- h) Enhancement of statutory oversight and role of relevant agencies
- i) Sectoral sustainability and a Just Transition framework for the sector
- j) Financial subsidies and the impact of Brexit



ALMOST **60%**
SAID THEY HAD BEEN INJURED AT WORK



62% SAID THEY HAD NOT
RECEIVED ENOUGH TRAINING



87% OF WORKERS SAID THAT THEY HAD NOT HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO
PROGRESS OR BE PROMOTED SINCE STARTING IN THEIR WORKPLACE.

90%

90% of meat processing companies **DO**
NOT OFFER SICK PAY to their workers in
the event of injury or illness



43% felt verbally bullied
35% felt psychologically bullied
96% said their employer did not
take effective action.



27% said they **are not paid**
extra if they work overtime



28% of the workers on the
lowest salaries (€12.00 and
below) have been working
for between 4 – 15 years

Not a single worker surveyed said they felt valued



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