



## Workers On the Line: Improving Jobs in Meat and Poultry Processing — Transcript

Hosted by the Aspen Institute's Food & Society Program and Economic Opportunities Program,  
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### Description

Meat and poultry processing are core to our food supply chain. According to the US Department of Agriculture, the average American consumes about 68 pounds of chicken, 48 pounds of pork, and 56 pounds of beef per year. Meanwhile, health and safety hazards are pervasive, and workers in these sectors face some of the harshest conditions in the US. They endure long hours on their feet, with few breaks, working with sharp tools at fast speeds. And they do so in cold, damp environments where exposure to various chemicals is common. Not surprisingly, severe injuries and even fatalities occur frequently. Adding insult to (literal) injury, many don't receive the pay or benefits needed to be economically secure. These conditions affect some of our most vulnerable compatriots, including undocumented workers and even children who have been found to be working in these facilities. These challenges are not new — Upton Sinclair famously described them in "The Jungle" over 100 years ago — but they can be solved.

In this virtual conversation, "Workers on the Line: Improving Jobs in Meat and Poultry Processing," a panel of experts discusses the challenges workers face, ideas for improving their jobs and well-being, and the policies and practices required to reshape this industry and build a sustainable system where workers, consumers, and businesses thrive together.

This is the second event in the discussion series, "The Hands that Feed Us." For more information about this event — including video, audio, transcript, speaker bios, and additional resources — visit our website: [aspen.meat](https://aspen.meat)

## Opening Remarks

### **Matt Helmer**

Managing Director, [Economic Opportunities Program](#), The Aspen Institute

Matt Helmer is the managing director at the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program and joined the program in April 2022. Matt's work focuses on developing conversations, tools, and research that advance job quality, equity, and economic security for workers with low and moderate incomes. He worked for the Institute's Workforce Strategies Initiative (WSI) from 2009 to 2014. With WSI, Matt researched community college and nonprofit partnerships and construction pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs, facilitated the Sector Skills Academy, and supported the Reinventing Low-Wage Work and Working in America discussion series.

Matt has a background in workforce development, affordable housing, and adult education. Before rejoining the Institute in 2022, Matt worked for the Seattle Housing Authority (SHA), where he led a team of analysts and project managers charged with advancing the agency's strategic priorities. Matt helped lead the development and implementation of workforce development and asset building programs, eviction prevention strategies, and trauma-informed customer service. Before joining SHA, Matt was a senior policy analyst at the Seattle Jobs Initiative, where he evaluated workforce development programs and conducted research on job quality and economic development issues in the Seattle region. Prior to coming to the Institute in 2009, Matt worked for a local nonprofit in Seattle supporting immigrants and refugees, served in Damascus as a senior English language fellow for the US State Department, and was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Tonga. He has bachelor's and master's degrees in teaching English to speakers of other languages from Southern Illinois University and a master's degree in public administration from the University of Washington. Matt lives outside Seattle with his wife and two sons and enjoys spending time with them exploring the beaches, mountains, and forests of the Pacific Northwest.

### **Corby Kummer**

Executive Director, [Food and Society Program](#), The Aspen Institute

Corby Kummer is executive director of the Food and Society program at the Aspen Institute, a senior lecturer at the Tufts Friedman School of Nutrition Science, and a senior editor of *The Atlantic*. In recent years, the Food and Society program launched new initiatives that include the Food Leaders Fellowship, Conversations on Food Justice, Safety First: Protecting Workers and Diners, Food is Medicine Research Action Plan, and Open Access: Equitable Equity for Food Businesses.

### **Eric Schlosser**

Journalist and Author of "Fast Food Nation"

Eric Schlosser is an investigative journalist and the author of *Fast Food Nation*, *Reefer Madness*, and, most recently, *Command and Control*, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. He has written for *Rolling Stone*, *The Atlantic*, and *The New Yorker*, among others, and has received a

number of journalism honors, including a National Magazine Award. Schlosser previously worked as a playwright for an independent film company. Two of his plays, *Americans* (2003) and *We the People* (2007), have been produced in renowned London theaters.

## Speakers

### **Shelly Anand**

Co-Founder and Executive Director, Sur Legal Collaborative

Shelly Anand is the co-founder and executive director of Sur Legal Collaborative. The daughter of Indian immigrants and the granddaughter of refugees from the partition of India and Pakistan, Anand has been fighting for immigrants and workers in the deep south for over a decade as a legal aid attorney, a litigator with the US Department of Labor, and an immigrant rights attorney. In October 2020, she co-founded Sur Legal Collaborative, an immigrant and worker rights nonprofit legal organization, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic after seeing that many of her immigrant clients had been deemed essential workers and knew nothing about their labor rights, particularly in the safety and health context. At Sur Legal, in addition to managing day-to-day operations of a startup nonprofit, Anand shares her legal expertise around the Occupational Safety and Health Act and other federal labor laws with grassroots groups, immigrants, and working-class communities and assists with drafting and filing effective labor complaints with labor agencies like the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the National Labor Relations Board.

She also assists immigrant workers with applications for immigration relief, including deferred action applications, and engages in national advocacy efforts to stop the labor abuse to deportation pipeline, whereby workers are retaliated against by their employers for exercising their whistleblower rights with calls to Immigration and Customs Enforcement and subsequent deportation. Anand is also a children's book author who writes books she wishes she had growing up as a brown girl in the deep south. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Wellesley College and her Juris Doctor from the University of North Carolina School of Law in Chapel Hill. She lives with her husband and two children in Decatur, Georgia.

### **Debbie Berkowitz**

Fellow, Georgetown University

Debbie Berkowitz is a worker safety and health policy expert and advocate. She was the director of the Worker Safety and Health Program Data Insights at the National Employment Law Project (NELP) for six years. While at NELP, she worked with national and state partners to develop successful policies and campaigns that improved conditions for vulnerable, low-wage workers in dangerous industries, including temporary workers and those in the meat, poultry, and food industry. Most recently, she helped lead campaigns for stronger state and federal standards to protect workers from COVID-19. She is the author of widely cited reports and research on model policies to improve worker safety and workers' compensation systems.

Her past positions include serving as chief of staff and then the senior policy advisor for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration from 2009 to 2015. Berkowitz was also the health and safety director of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union and the health and safety director of the Food and Allied Service Trades Department of the AFL-CIO. She has testified before congressional and state legislative committee hearings, and her writing has been published in the Washington Post, Bloomberg BNA, Workers' Compensation, Quartz, the Hill, and more. Berkowitz is regularly quoted by major news outlets for her expertise on worker safety and health. She is the recipient of numerous awards, including the American Public Health Association's Alice Hamilton Award.

### **Kim Cordova**

President, UFCW Local 7, Colorado

Kim Cordova was elected president of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) Local 7 in 2009 and is currently serving her fifth term. She is the first woman, in its 150-year history, to lead Local 7 and also serves as vice president of UFCW International. Cordova believes when there is a strong labor movement, there is a strong middle class – the key to rebuilding the economies of Colorado and Wyoming.

Cordova, a Local 7 union member for 39 years and counting, has dedicated her career to fighting for the health, safety, and well-being of working people. In 1985, while still in high school, she began her career as a grocery bagger for Safeway. While working at the store, she was held at gunpoint, an experience that sparked her passion for workplace safety. After eight years at Safeway, in several positions including stocker, checker, and baker, she was hired in 1993 as a Local 7 union organizer and later as a union representative. She served in that position until May 2009 when she returned to work at Safeway. Later in 2009 as a rank-and-file member, Cordova ran for president of UFCW Local 7 on a reform platform to implement ethical practices and other financial controls to restore credibility to Colorado's largest private sector labor union. Following a stunning upset victory over a longtime incumbent, Cordova assumed office in 2010.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, she has been a vocal advocate in calling for enforceable safety measures for her members, America's essential workers. Under her leadership during the pandemic, the union has called for increased onsite COVID-19 testing, improved workplace safety measures, paid sick leave, and maintaining hazard pay until the danger has subsided for her members — many of whom are considered essential workers.

As one of the few Latinas elected to union leadership in the United States, Cordova is helping pave the way for a new generation of women of color in organized labor. UFCW Local 7 represents more than 25,000 grocery, meatpacking, food processing, health care, cosmetology, and barbershop workers in Colorado and Wyoming. Cordova resides in Denver with her family and two dogs. The family enjoys playing tennis, riding bikes, and driving in the mountains. She's often cheering on her home state teams including the Denver Broncos, Denver Nuggets, Colorado Avalanche, and the Colorado Rockies.

### **Dr. Angela Stuesse**

Associate Professor of Anthropology, UNC, Chapel Hill

Dr. Angela Stuesse is a cultural anthropologist and associate professor of anthropology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, where she directs the Graduate Certificate in Participatory Research. Much of her work has explored the structural conditions shaping the lives of immigrants and low wage workers in the United States. Her book, "Scratching Out a Living," based on six years of politically engaged research with poultry workers and their allies, explores how this industry's careful cultivation of a precarious labor force has impacted communities and prospects for worker organizing. Angela's work has been featured in the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, USA Today, the Atlantic, the New Yorker, CNN, Univision, NPR, and dozens of other print, radio, TV, and multimedia outlets.

## Moderator

### Leah Douglas

Reporter, Reuters

Leah Douglas is the agriculture and energy policy reporter at Reuters, covering food and farm issues in federal policy, regulation, litigation, competition, labor, and more. Previously, they were a staff writer and associate editor at the Food and Environment Reporting Network, an independent, nonprofit newsroom. Douglas' reporting has been published in the Guardian, the Nation, the Washington Post, Mother Jones, NPR, the American Prospect, Time, and other outlets. Their reporting has been cited in dozens of print and television media outlets, including the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Associated Press, NBC Nightly News, and John Oliver's "Last Week Tonight." Douglas has received fellowships from UC Berkeley, Vermont Law and Graduate School, Institute for Journalism and Natural Resources, and the New Economies Reporting Project. They have won awards from the National Association of Agricultural Journalists for feature and investigative reporting, and they were the 2020 recipient of the National Farmers Union Milt Hakel Award for excellence in agricultural reporting.

## Transcript

### Matt Helmer (00:00:06)

Good afternoon everybody. I'm Matt Helmer, managing director of the Economic Opportunities Program at the Aspen Institute, and it's my great pleasure to welcome you to today's conversation, "Workers On the Line: Improving Jobs in Meat and Poultry Processing." This conversation is a collaboration between the Economic Opportunities Program and our colleagues at the Food & Society Program at the Institute, and it's the second in a three-part series that we call "The Hands That Feed Us: Job Quality Challenges in the Food Supply Chain." Before we get started, let's just go over our technology as we always do really quickly. All of you are muted. Please use that Q&A button to submit your questions. Please share your perspective, ideas, and resources in the chat. We will send out a survey after the call concludes. We appreciate your feedback and hope you'll complete that.

We encourage you to post about this conversation on the social media platform of your choice. Our hashtag is #TalkOpportunity. If you do run across any technical issues today, please message us in the chat or email us at [eop.program@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:eop.program@aspeninstitute.org). We are recording this event and we will share it via email as well as post it on our website afterwards. And finally, closed captions are available. Just click that CC button at the bottom of your screen to activate them. We have a really amazing lineup of speakers and panelists to talk today about the experiences of meat and poultry workers. As we'll hear today, the working conditions within these facilities and in this sector can be quite shocking I think and should alarm us all. But I think it's important to note up front as we get into this conversation that these jobs really don't have to be this way. They weren't always this way in some cases, and there's nothing that prevents us from making this work safe and dignified.

And while it's easy, I think for us to point the blame at the businesses in the sector and they do share a lot of that blame, I think it's also good to say up front that we all have some ownership over these issues. Our government could certainly pass and enforce stronger regulations, our grocery retailers and restaurants that buy and sell meat and poultry could leverage their purchasing power to force change. And certainly we as consumers could demand better. We've made a lot of progress on how the animals that we eat are treated, but we haven't done much unfortunately for the workers who process those animals. And I'm a huge animal lover and I don't want to trivialize the issues of animal rights. Those are very important and I think there's certainly a lot more we can do on that front, but I think we can do a lot more on the worker front too. Those challenges have often escaped us.

If we can demand free-range chicken and eggs, I think we can demand workers be free to organize and free of intimidation. If we care that our meat is not injected with hormones or other chemicals, then we should care that workers enjoy a safe workplace without exposure to dangerous chemicals as well. If we care that our cows are grass-fed, then we should care that the workers who process the cows earn enough to actually feed themselves and their families. And if we care and advocate that animals be treated humanely, then we should also advocate that the workers be treated with dignity and humanity as well.

Building a sustainable food system can't be done without thinking about the health and well-being of the workers who make up that system. I'm very much looking forward today to hearing from our speakers about how we can create this brighter future for the workers who mean so much to our well-being. But it's my great pleasure at this time to pass the baton to my colleague Corby Kummer, who's executive director of the Food & Society Program at the Aspen Institute, and our wonderful partners in this series. So Corby, I'll hand it off to you.

**Corby Kummer (00:03:39)**

Thank you, Matt. Our wonderful partners are Matt Max Queen behind the scenes, Maureen Conway of Economic Opportunities Program guiding us right behind us. We were thrilled when the Economic Opportunities Program came to us to co-sponsor this series. We've been delighted and honored to work with Share Our Strength No Kid Hungry on our conversations on food justice series, which started during the pandemic and goes on in forest. We just had one last week and they're constant. Please go to [aspenfood.org](http://aspenfood.org) to look at our upcoming schedule.

Food justice is really always about human justice. So as Matt was just saying, it comes to human rights and that's what we'll be talking about today. In a solutions oriented way, I value the Economic Opportunities Program for foregrounding and so will our panelists today. To introduce our panel, we have Eric Schlosser whose fast food nation is theoretically about food. It's about worker justice and human rights and one of the great texts on it of the modern age. So we were delighted that Eric agreed to give opening remarks as it happened. He needed to record them virtually, and here they are, seven dynamite minutes. I look forward to it as you should.

**Eric Schlosser (00:05:06)**

I'm sorry that I'm not with you all live today. It's a real honor though, to be invited to speak, and I applaud The Aspen Institute for taking an interest in The Hands That Feed Us. I went into a meatpacking plant for the first time in 1997, and I went in as a worker named Jose Morales into the Monfort plant in Greeley, Colorado, a beef slaughterhouse, a mega slaughterhouse where about 400 cattle were being processed an hour. And I was led through the entire plant as an aspiring worker, and I was absolutely appalled by what I saw, not by the blood and the guts and the dismemberment of huge animals, but by the incredibly difficult and dangerous working conditions, the extraordinary pressure that these immigrant workers were under to keep the line moving at all costs.

That really led me to investigate the meatpacking industry for my book Fast Food Nation. And I came to see the truth of what Upton Sinclair found more than a century ago. Upton Sinclair in the jungle used the meatpacking industry as a symbol in a metaphor for the greed and the ruthlessness of the monopoly capitalism of his day. And sadly, 25 years ago, I found the same truth that he had, workers being treated like disposable commodities, high injury rates, union busting, low wages. And the heart of my book Fast Food Nation was really about the abuse of America's immigrant meatpacking workers.

23 years after I went into that plant in Greeley, Colorado, the same slaughterhouse was in the news because of the way that a new company, JBS, was sacrificing the workers in that plant. The facility in Greeley, Colorado was at the cutting edge of the COVID epidemic. And we saw during COVID how this industry was willing to completely sacrifice the health of its workers for profit. It's quite astonishing, and Congress did quite a powerful investigation of the way in which profit was put way above the health and safety of America's meatpacking workers. And at the same time when in China, companies like Tyson were insisting that its workers wear masks, in the United States, Tyson was fighting against any sort of health and safety protections mandated by the government. The Greeley plant came up again because the health department of Weld County really fought to shut down that plant to protect its workers.

And we had something unprecedented, which was an executive order by the president of the United States to keep the meatpacking plants open to sacrifice the workers. And that executive order that Trump issued was written by the legal team at Tyson Foods. So 100 years after the jungle, more than 100 years after the jungle, it's remarkable how similar the problems are today. And the meatpacking industry offers a textbook case of how an industry through monopoly power or oligopolistic power can capture the government agencies trying to regulate it and can earn enormous profits at the expense of the health of its workers and the local communities.

Now, I would like to say that things are much better than when I went into that meatpacking plant in 1997, but I actually think they're worse because I went into, and I've been into meatpacking communities in Texas, Colorado, Nebraska, Washington state, I heard all kinds of terrible stories about workers being injured and fired, about workers continuing to work while injured. I met workers who had suffered amputations of limbs, terrible injuries. But in all my time in the meatpacking communities of the United States 20 years ago, I never encountered a single case of child labor. And yet, as we have now seen through terrific reporting by the New York Times and investigations by the Department of Justice, child labor is now routine in this industry.

In *Fast Food Nation*, I wrote about how the worst job in the slaughterhouse is performed by those who come in at night to clean the slaughterhouse. I mean, it's an unimaginably hard job. And we now have children performing that job in the United States at tremendous risk to not only to their physical well-being, but to their psychic well-being because when you see what these plants look like, it's the worst mess that you can imagine.

The members of this panel that Aspen has assembled really are the experts on this subject. And I'm not only hugely impressed by the work that all these panelists have done, but quite honestly, I've been inspired by it because I care deeply about this issue, and those who have devoted their careers to it deserve great admiration and respect.

Now, a century ago, Upton Sinclair's solution to the total abuse of immigrant workers in meatpacking was state socialism. And we've seen how that worked out, not too well in the Soviet Union, the Eastern Bloc, Venezuela, et cetera. But instead of state socialism, what we have in the United States is a very pernicious form of corporate socialism in which the government is protecting companies and allowing them to impose their business costs on the rest of society. And the reality in meatpacking, particularly when it comes to beef, is that the labor costs are a very small proportion of the total costs. In the beef industry, buying cattle is the biggest expense.

And I'd like to just conclude by saying there's nothing inevitable about the problem that we're seeing right now. And at remarkably low cost to consumers, we can be paying a living wage to meatpacking workers. We can have really strong safety protections, and we can have labor unions in all of these plants as we did a generation ago, to make sure that these protections are enforced. All it requires is a compassion for the people who feed us and a real desire to give them and the important work they do, a sense of dignity. So thank you again for inviting me to speak, and I really truly applaud what The Aspen Institute is doing here and what all of you panelists have devoted your careers to.

### **Corby Kummer (00:13:10)**

Eric clearly feels that in his bones. He spoke without any notes and we didn't see any teleprompter in his home office. And a lot of us, many of us have been inspired by Eric's work. Thank you, Eric, for graciously giving us all of that time.

I'm delighted to be able to introduce our panelists. We have Debbie Berkowitz, a fellow at Georgetown University, former chief of staff at OSHA. We all know OSHA, Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Shelly Anand, co-founder and executive director at Sur Legal Collaborative. Kim Cordova, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 7.



Angela Stuesse, associate professor of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina, and author of *Scratching Out a Living: Latinos, Race, and Work in the Deep South*.

And speaking of inspiration, a second year law student whose goal is to work with Kim Cordova emailed me just before and said, "Oh, she's really going to be on. She's really speaking." So many of our panelists have inspired lots of people in the audience and us. And Leah Douglas has inspired me. Her work at The Food & Environment Reporting Network during the pandemic brought attention to the horrifying toll in illness and death that meatpacking house workers paid for us. She went right up to the top of my journalistic firmament, her work there and has stayed there. So we're thrilled to have Leah, the agriculture and energy reporter and Reuters as our moderator today. Leah, I turn it over to you with thanks to all.

**Leah Douglas (00:14:56)**

Thanks so much Corby, that's really generous. And I've been reading Corby since I was nearly an aspiring journalist many, many years ago. So it's really full circle. This is such a great panel. I'm really excited for this conversation. I'm the agriculture and energy policy reporter at Reuters where I cover really anything to do with the US food and farm system. I cover federal agencies, regulation, state laws and issues related to labor and equity, corporate consolidation and so on. And my engagement with the COVID tracking project that I did at FERN for about the first two years of the pandemic really served to show me how entrenched so many of the issues that workers were facing at that really difficult time had already been even before this major global public health crisis.

And so many of the issues, whether access to sick time and time off, access to PPE, access to regular work schedules, these issues had predated the pandemic. And we, during that really acute scary period, saw just an explosion in coverage of these issues. And the pandemic really served to pull the curtain up for so many of us into the realities that workers in the food system face. And today we're going to talk about meat and poultry packing workers, that there's so many issues specific to that industry as well that I'm really eager to get into. So I'm going to throw it straight to the panel because we have so much to cover, so much expertise to draw on. And Debbie, I wanted to start with you. You have decades of expertise in this area, so can you just tell folks a bit about your career and particularly help us to start understanding the relationship between government and government agencies and the meat and poultry sector?

**Debbie Berkowitz (00:16:56)**

Thank you, Leah. First, I want to thank The Aspen Institute for this program focused on improving conditions for the over 500,000 workers in our nation's meat slaughter and processing plants. As Leah knows, I've been a worker safety advocate for over 40 years, and I started back in the 1980 as the health and safety director of the union representing meat and poultry workers. The meat industry is one of the harshest industries to work in. Back when I started, there were many smaller independent companies in either poultry or meat. The companies were more heavily unionized then, and the union was able to lift working conditions and wages for much of the industry. But fast forward four decades, and the industry is nothing like what it was when I started. It is completely consolidated. Today you have two huge billion dollar companies dominating the entire meat and poultry industry, and setting the tone.

JBL's Pilgrim's Pride, which bought Monfort, which Eric talked about, is Brazilian owned, is the largest meat and poultry company in the world and the second in the United States. Tyson Foods is the largest meat and poultry company in the US and the second in the world. They are both combined chicken, pork and cattle slaughter companies, and they totally dominate both the chicken and the red meat industry. And unions now, for example, represent just about a quarter of the poultry workers. They represent more red meat.

In addition to being consolidated, the poultry industry, for example, is also vertically integrated. Tyson Foods, for example, owns every part of the poultry production process, the birds, the feed, the transportation, and the processing plants. The concentration in the industry enabled the big players to totally shape government policy, as Eric pointed out in his opening. He mentioned how Tyson Foods drafted an executive order that President Trump signed at the beginning of the COVID pandemic as COVID raced like wildfire through meat plants, sickening hundreds, in some cases thousands of workers in individual plants all over the country, and then it spread into their communities.

The order purportedly required meat plants to stay open despite the risk to workers in communities, though the order legally actually didn't do that. But that was the industry spin. All through the last administration, the meat industry used their political muscle to make sure they did not have to implement COVID protections for workers in their plants. JBS made a phone call to the White House to complain that CDC guidance to protect workers was too protective. And stunningly, right after, CDC weakened their guidance, not just for JBS, but for all workers. The meat industry had the USDA fight local health departments from shutting down facilities where COVID was sickening more than half the workers and spreading into the community. And they used their political muscle in big meat states like Nebraska to stop the states from revealing to workers and the public and reporters like Leah the true infection rate in the plants. Why did the government roll over? Maybe because the industry spread, the baseless fears of meat shortages and reports have found that there were no meat shortages. Thank you.

**Leah Douglas (00:20:13)**

[inaudible 00:20:13] so much, Debbie. You talked a bit about union density and how important organizing is to this story. So Kim, I want to push it over to you. Can you talk a bit about your work and what is it like organizing the workers in the Greeley area through UFCW Local 7?

**Kim Cordova (00:20:32)**

Yes. Hi. Thank you for inviting me to this important discussion. I am always so grateful for anybody who wants to talk about this industry. So again, I'm Kim Cordova, I'm the president of Local 7. I'm also an international vice president. I will tell you, I started my career, I've been a member since 1985. I started in the grocery business. I was a courtesy clerk in high school, but I became a union activist. And in 1993, I became an organizer. And my first campaign was the Monfort meat plant. And so in 93, I was the lead organizer and we went out, we were voting the plant and we actually won. And so we've represented that plant since 93. And it's really important to me because I'll tell you that the workers that work in that facility work in the most dangerous conditions imaginable. It's very fast-paced. They're working shoulder to shoulder with very little PPE.

In my Greeley facility, there are 57 languages that are spoken, and it's very difficult for workers to talk and engage and talk about working conditions. But it's a very strong union plant, and I'm very proud of our work there. I'll tell you that the biggest problem that we have in the plant is the language barrier with workers. We have a lot of workers from all over the world that come in as refugees, immigrants. We see an older workforce. We have a lot of women that work in the facility. And COVID really exposed the reality, the working conditions of these workers of the industry. And there's systemic problems throughout the world. And so it's really important to organize.

I'll tell you that it was horrible for what happened in our plant during the pandemic, we saw the most deaths and workers that were placed on ventilators and illnesses. We saw up to 500 workers a shift calling in sick because they were either scared to go to work or they were on ventilators or they were in the hospitals or at home trying to self-medicate or take care of themselves. And so the work of labor is so important in this industry that we need to have better laws for workers to find a path to unionize.

And in this industry, and I can go on all day and talk about it, but the work that the UFCW does is really important, fighting for safer workplaces to fight against the work-well-sick culture. That is a big deal in this industry where a lot of workers, even in the unionized facilities do not have paid sick leave or paid family leave, and workers have to make decisions to face financial devastation or die at work and go to work. And so we really need to make real changes. We did that here in Colorado, and I'll speak more about that later on in the program, but I'm happy to answer any questions from the panelists or from anybody in the audience.

**Leah Douglas (00:24:08)**

I think one of the really great things about this panel is we have so much geographic diversity and so we can really hear accounts from all over the country. And so Angela, I wanted to turn to you to talk about your experience with the poultry workers and organizations that you've encountered in Mississippi.

**Dr. Angela Stuesse (00:24:29)**

I also want to lift up The Aspen Institute from making this a topic of conversation that more and more folks are paying attention to. As y'all mentioned earlier, I'm an anthropologist, I'm a sociocultural anthropologist. I am situated within academia as a scholar, but all of my work has really been inspired by the question of research for whom? Who are we studying this industry for? And I got involved in studying the poultry industry about a little over 20 years ago when folks in the south were sort of first reckoning with the realization that their communities were changing as a result of the increase of Latin American immigrants in rural towns and trying to figure out what was the cause of that and where were folks coming from. And it turns out that across the south, much of that shift was driven by the poultry industry, which is, as many on the call know, really seeded across the rural south.

So the question when I first began working with a loose coalition of folks in rural Mississippi's poultry area was what research could contribute to this effort and to our trying to understand the changes that are happening, both in terms of the communities and in terms of what that

meant for workers' abilities to organize in the plants. Whereas Kim was just pointing out, having a more diverse workforce brings up all sorts of questions, including language and culture and other historical differences. So I spent about six years collaborating with this coalition of folks in Mississippi who ended up creating sort of a short-lived Mississippi Poultry Workers Center that was trying to work with the unions and with the religious leaders of the area and the employment justice attorneys. It was a real hodgepodge of folks that were all sort of grappling with and trying to figure out how to improve the conditions in the plants under these sorts of new changes which have continued to accelerate. And I wrote about this in my first book, *Scratching Out a Living*. So I'm really excited to be here and to talk more about it today.

**Leah Douglas (00:27:12)**

...More about that a little later on. So Shelly, turning to you now. Can you give us sort of an overview of your work, your working with workers in Georgia? Tell us a bit about your latest.

**Shelly Anand (00:27:25)**

Sure. Well, thank you Aspen Institute and to my co-panelists for including me in this conversation. I'm really happy to be here and grateful that we're having this critical conversation because I think if people truly knew what protein processing workers and food workers did, we would look at our food system very differently. So I started out my career 13 years ago as an attorney here in Georgia. I was born and raised here. I'm the daughter of immigrants. And so I always knew I wanted to do social justice work working with immigrant communities. And I started my career as a legal aid attorney with the Georgia Legal Services program where I was doing a little bit of everything from family law to housing. And one of the cases that is most salient in my mind is representing a poultry worker in Polk County, which is in north Georgia on the border with Alabama on an unemployment appeal.

And she had very bad tendonitis and carpal tunnel from rote repetitive motion. Her hands had literally stopped working, and it was a really eye-opening experience, talking to her, representing her, and just hearing stories from her and her co-workers about what it was like to work in the poultry facility and how it had literally broken down her body to the point that she could no longer work. And so I then worked as a trial attorney with the US Department of Labor, and one of my first cases representing the Occupational Safety and Health Administration was against a poultry facility called Mar-Jac in Gainesville, Georgia, which is known as the poultry capital of the world. And I quickly learned what the poultry industry is up against with the defense bar and with these attorneys who literally used to work with DOL, with OSHA and go and represent the employer, and how vigorously they defend their fourth amendment rights, but really try to cover the eyes and ears of the public and of investigators from seeing what's happening in these poultry facilities.

In the Mar-Jac case, a person had been electrocuted in the back of the facility. And in the defense bar world, they really want to prevent what they call wall-to-wall inspections. And they really want to prevent inspectors from seeing what are called plain view hazards, where they see that workers are not wearing goggles and are getting conjunctivitis, that there's not machine guarding and they're getting amputated, that the floors are slippery and they're falling, that the aisles are so narrow that they're getting struck by forklifts. They don't want you to see

any of that. To the point that our OSHA investigator in the case wanted to see the equipment that this worker had been using to do electrical paneling work and had to walk across the facility to go to the locker. And the attorney for Mar-Jac told her to put a cardboard box over her head if she wanted to walk through the facility to see it.

And that was my introduction to the world of litigation in the poultry industry and how difficult, how many things are stacked against the workers and against worker advocates. We don't have a private right of action. The only people that can litigate OSHA cases are employment defense attorneys and OSHA litigators whom, like I said, many go over and become defense side attorneys. And so we lack expertise on how to litigate OSHA cases as a worker rights community. And I left DOL after six difficult years. I learned a lot, but I'm also a young mother and want to strive for work-life balance. And I started working with an immigrant rights nonprofit to practice immigration law to learn asylum and the actual nuts and bolts of immigration law. And I started that work one week before the pandemic. And I quickly realized that I had been in a bubble living working in the federal government, and that all of these workers, immigrant and low-income communities of color had been deemed essential workers and yet knew nothing about their labor rights, particularly in the safety and health context.

And while the OSHA nerd in me was very excited that people were talking about PPE, I know PPE isn't just a mask, right? It's goggles, it's gloves, it's fall protection if you're in construction. And so my work shifted and I saw the need, particularly in the Deep South for a worker rights organization that de-lawyers the work of filing labor complaints and helps workers and unions and worker centers access the bureaucratic processes that I had become an expert in as a trial attorney and supporting workers during COVID.

And as I'll talk about a tragic incident that occurred three months into our founding where six workers were killed during a nitrogen leak. But the horrors of this industry never cease to amaze me. Every day we hear stories of women miscarrying children and their rights under the Family Medical Leave Act being violated and getting fired from missing a day of work because you've miscarried a child. During COVID, people got sick and infected their community and community members died. And the weaknesses of our laws, the weaknesses. As much as I love my colleagues at OSHA and the work that I did, the law is very weak and we have much to do to improve it and make it stronger and protect this vulnerable community. So thank you.

**Leah Douglas (00:33:36)**

Thanks so much, Shelly. Angela, let's go back to you. Can you start to kind of take us inside one of these communities? You said you closely collaborated for six years with a poultry worker community. What did you learn in that time about the relationship between the industry and the people in the community and the workers at the poultry plant? Share some of your insights with us.

**Dr. Angela Stuesse (00:34:03)**

I think Debbie mentioned consolidation, so maybe we can get to that as well. Because during the time that I worked in Mississippi, I sort of got to see the beginnings of the consolidation of the industry, which has escalated in time since. But I think it's not a coincidence that the poultry

industry has largely sighted itself in the rural south right there in communities that are hard to access, that have not a lot of the other economic opportunities that generally have had historically large pools of folks who didn't have other options. And so they had a built-in labor pool and where union organizing is toughest, some of the most anti-union legislation. And I think this all sort of lays the groundwork for what's happening in a place like Mississippi where when this industry first started consolidating after World War II, they brought in poor white women, who were the first folks who were working on the line.

And we've seen sort of a ethno-racial succession over the decades, which I think points to a strategy that this industry has used to maintain as flexible or exploitable a labor force as possible. So where I worked in Mississippi, there were almost no white workers in the plants by the time I got there in 2002. The plants had become mostly staffed by African American men and women in the years following the Mississippi freedom struggle and the civil rights movement where folks got access to better jobs out of sharecropping and domestic work and into the chicken plants. And then in the '70s and '80s and '90s when this Black workforce started organizing and gaining traction in organizing for better wages and working conditions and were really demanding that the industry or that their employers negotiate with them, this is when in Mississippi management realized there was a large pool of workers in South Texas and South Florida that they could figure out a scheme for importing.

So one of the stories that I sort of emphasize throughout my work is the ways in which it's not sort of haphazard that rural Mississippi became home to Latin Americans, but rather was part of a really strategic plan that had everything to do with controlling and constricting workers' opportunities. And then we saw, so when I was working with the worker center, plants had both African American and Latin American workers from lots of different backgrounds, but folks didn't necessarily see eye to eye and weren't able to communicate in the ways that Kim mentioned. I think we've seen since then additional efforts to sort of toggle between different labor forces when it behooved the industry for political or economic reasons. So for example, in 2019, what we now know is the largest single-state workplace rate in US history was inflicted upon, I think it was seven different chicken plants at the same time across six different towns in the area where I worked in Mississippi, detaining nearly 700 workers, many of whom were criminalized.

And in that moment, the industry turned back toward the local African American workforce and was doing a lot of heavy recruitment among Black workers. Six months later, 12 months later, during COVID when Black workers had a little bit more power because there were some federally sponsored unemployment supports for working people, the industry turned back toward these incredibly exploited or precaritized Latin American workers. And I think it looks different like what population the industry relies on at any given moment in any given geography can look different. Someone mentioned refugees, but I think that this is really something that we saw in Mississippi, and that is a key feature of the way that poultry and meatpacking ensures profit and labor control.

**Leah Douglas (00:39:01)**

Yeah, it's so fascinating. You mentioned how different communities' engagement with labor organizing and with unions can be a factor that's at play in all these shifts. Kim, can you talk a bit more about that? You said in your opening comments, in your experience, how important it is for

there to be a path to organizing. How have you seen that play out in your community? What was the experience during COVID and how did that reveal so much need among the workforce? And what role did the union play?

**Kim Cordova (00:39:37)**

I mean, what happened with COVID I think will go down in this country's history as the biggest failure for workers ever. And we saw our government turn their back on workers for the consumer's steak or cheeseburger and treat these workers as fungible widgets, as just disposable objects. And when COVID first hit in Greeley, Colorado, we were watching Local 7 and the UFCW, we were watching COVID move through Europe and start to come into the US. And we immediately went to OSHA, asked OSHA to bring inspectors out because of the close proximity, the line speed issue. There was no, we're looking at older facilities with old ventilation systems. It's hot, it's cold, there's fans, there's a lot of common touch points, and we couldn't get inspectors out there at the time. And a lot of that is because President Trump at the time had defunded OSHA and there were less inspectors out there.

But the failure, there were so many deaths that happened, and folks that now have long COVID or were placed on ventilators and have serious long-term health problems, but we saw JBS flex their muscle, these large meat packers go to the federal government and have the president of the United States force workers to come to work in those conditions. And I'll tell you that I know Eric referenced that it was the county, I guess the public health county trying to shut down that plant and that wasn't what happened, it was Local 7 that demanded that the plant be shut down. And workers were not coming to work, and I mean 500 workers a shift, 700 workers a shift. The company was shutting down their calling line, so you couldn't call in, but workers were not coming in. The work well sick culture is so bad within that industry that workers didn't know what to do because they didn't, at that point, people were going to die or face homelessness or hunger or starvation.

And so it really showed how bad that industry is. And you're right, Angela, they built these facilities in rural communities in very conservative parts of the country where there's not going to be a lot of support for those workers. Workers' children, people don't talk about the impact of their family or their kids or their mental health having to work side by side with workers that died. Or kids were bullied at school because their parents were packing house workers and everybody thought they were spreading COVID in their community, which wasn't true. So with labor, I'll tell you, we were very loud. We fought the company through the media, despite them threatening to sue me personally, sue my union. We had elected officials calling, trying to force the plant to open up. But what we did is we got even louder and flexed our union muscle across the country and exposed these bad employers like this.

And so we also called OSHA out on the carpet as well, pushing them to come out and visit these facilities. We challenged the fines that were issued to the employers for the deaths, and we fought that. But I'll tell you, some good things came out. Of everything bad that happened with COVID, some good things came out. But because all of this was exposed, we were able in Colorado to pass paid family leave. So now every worker, union or non, doesn't matter, there's no carve outs. For every hour or 30 hours you work, you accrue an hour of sick leave up to 48 hours. You could use it to take care of your children, you could use it for yourself. You could use it

in our increments, you could use it for doctor's appointments. And we pass paid family leave. So workers get 12 weeks of paid family leave now for themselves or their family.

And so we've been fighting. We're trying to push for a state OSHA program here in Colorado, and we're hoping that the Biden administration will fully fund OSHA so that we have more inspectors out. We're pushing the administration to hire more inspectors out there, but there's a lot of work that needs to be done, and we need a better path to organizing. We need to stop captive audience meetings in these facilities. And we're working on a law right now in Colorado to do so.

The other thing we're trying to push is that no employer in this industry can hire anybody under the age of 18. We saw that they were using these facilities, and had contractors that were hiring children in this very dangerous job. And we need to make sure that laws are passed to protect our kids and protect workers and to stop the blatant exploitation of these hard workers. You can't call them essential and then not protect them. And these workers need to go home in the condition that they clocked in. And so it takes really having these kinds of conversations and keeping this discussion going is another path to help protect these workers. And so I appreciate the dialogue.

**Leah Douglas (00:45:50)**

Yeah. Thanks so much, Kim. You're sharing really difficult stories, and I wanted to draw the connection back to a story that Shelly mentioned and her remarks about a very difficult experience you had just after starting this organization in Georgia. Can you share a little bit more about that?

**Shelly Anand (00:46:12)**

Sure. Yeah. So three months into our founding in January of 2020 on January 28, 2021, there was a liquid nitrogen leak at a poultry processing facility called Foundation Food Group. And they make chicken tenders. And this was a new liquid nitrogen freezer to freeze the chicken tenders. And six workers died in the early morning, and there were about 130 workers present who escaped. And as the facts kind of came out in the hours and days and weeks after, just so many unsafe conditions that harken back to the jungle, harken back to the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, go back to the, Angela was talking about, I wrote this down, the ethno-racial succession of this workforce, the Hamlin fire in North Carolina over 30 years ago where a poultry facility where doors were locked. And Black women, many Black women, many of whom were single mothers, met with their death because they couldn't get out of the building during a fire.

And here during the nitrogen leak, the workers only knew of one exit door, and OSHA law requires at least two exit doors. Those exit doors were blocked by pieces of equipment, which is not something that is uncommon, but in a situation like this, it's literally life or death. And so in the aftermath of this leak, just getting information about this freezer, the workers didn't even know what liquid nitrogen was. They didn't even know the types of chemicals that were present in the facility, the chemicals that they were working with, even though OSHA requires training, it requires safety data sheets, it requires all of this information to be in a language they can understand. Some of these folks have limited literacy. Not only are they limited English proficient



or even indigenous language speakers, but they don't know how to read and write. So having pictographs and all of these things are required by law, and they just were not present.

Six weeks after the nitrogen leak, there was an ammonia leak, and we were getting these frantic phone calls from the workers calling us crying, not knowing what was happening and saying, it's happening again. Are we going to die? Are we going to go to heaven with our coworkers? And the employer's attorney who represents all the poultry facilities down here in the south was like, "You cannot come to OSHA. You need to go get a warrant." And that's where Debbie and I worked together to write a complaint so that OSHA could get in the building. But that took litigation, that took months of litigation in North Georgia, fighting against, again, attempts to prevent OSHA from coming in from seeing not just the hazards surrounding why this ammonia leak happened, but other common hazards that happen routinely in this industry.

And it was a really, really difficult experience. Many of us that were involved in the rapid response, I would say we have secondary trauma from it meeting up with this community, which is majority women, majority Latina women from Mexico and Guatemala and Honduras who fled violence and poverty to create a better life for themselves 15, 20 years ago, and have been put into low paying hazardous jobs. At Sur we call it the labor abuse to deportation pipeline. Angela, you brought up the Coke foods raids. That was front of center, that was front of mine. For us in Georgia, Gainesville, Georgia has a 287g agreement between local law enforcement and ICE. So local law enforcement is deputized with authority to enforce immigration laws with route traffic stops. And so we were very afraid for not just the health and safety of these workers, but them being retaliated in one of the most violent forms possible with deportation.

And so I think one of the lessons learned for us was it feels at times the insurmountable gap in knowledge, but it's not, we are just so privileged that we've been in community with these brave workers for the last three years who have become leaders in their own right who did call us six weeks later when an ammonia leak happened and said, "Yes, I'll file a complaint. This is unacceptable. I'm not going to come. I'm not going to die at work. I'm not going to let more of my coworkers die." And then 14 months after the nitrogen leak, when Foundation Food Group switched ownership, they sold the facility to another company, Gold Creek Foods, there was a bleach spill. So three chemical leaks within a 14-month period. But these workers continued to call and speak out and cooperate with OSHA investigators.

But it is something that I don't think any of them will ever forget. None of us will ever forget. And our focus right now is prevention so that this shouldn't happen again. And it is very disheartening at times because I know folks like Debbie who've been fighting for these workers and against these practices for so long. It feels at times hopeless, especially when we have a case like what Debbie worked on in Mississippi with the 16-year-old boy who was killed or died. It's a plant where we had a case where a woman's husband died only three years before this death.

And the amount of education and care that these workers need is not being met by their employer even though it's required by law. And so we're having to step in and step in a way that OSHA is not able to because of the lack of funding, because of the limited number of inspectors, and then because of what they're up against when they do decide to open an inspection knowing that they're going to have to fight tooth and nail in courts even to walk in the door. And so it's an uphill battle, but the bravery of these survivors that I think prior to the nitrogen leak would've been very reluctant to speak out about irregularities in the workplace, but now having

survived this and subsequent leaks are willing and wanting to speak out. And I have so much hope that there is a future in Georgia, which is 96% non-union, that we can get to a future where there is organizing capabilities and capacities for the most vulnerable workers, including undocumented workers, and that they are welcomed into organizing efforts by the larger labor movement.

**Leah Douglas (00:53:54)**

Debbie, I was hoping to throw it to you to kind of build on that. Can you give us kind of the big picture of these incidents? Are they isolated? Are they common? And talk a little bit about also child labor, which has come up a few times, and that's a very live topic in this sector right now.

**Debbie Berkowitz (00:54:15)**

Yeah. No, none of this is a one-off. Let me just give you sort of an overview of just the industry. First, due to the very harsh conditions, the worker turnover rate in the meat and poultry industry is very high. It ranges for an average of 60% in a plant to as high as 150% in a plant per year. Data from the Department of Labor, based on the industry's own self-reported numbers show that meatpacking workers suffer injuries that result in lost time or restricted duty at rates triple the average for all industries. And by the way, four government agencies have found that these statistics are all undercounts. The true injury rates are much higher for meat and poultry plants. Poultry workers suffer amputations at rates five times the average for all industries. And meatpacking workers suffer amputations at a rate 14 times the average for all industries.

An analysis of OSHA data found that among the thousands and thousands of companies reporting severe injuries like amputations to the government, Tyson Foods had the 5th highest number of reported severe injuries, and JBS Pilgrim's Pride had the 8th highest number of reported severe injuries among thousands and thousands of companies reporting. Further due to the breakneck line speeds and forceful nature of the work, workers have high rates of work-related musculoskeletal disorders such as carpal tunnel syndrome. Government studies have found that between 30 and 40% of production workers in poultry plants studied, suffered from painful carpal tunnel syndrome that can be lifelong and prevent workers from doing the job. And of course, you've just heard about all the chemicals that are in poultry plants. You don't think about this, but they have a lot of very toxic chemicals that can seriously make workers ill and kill them.

Median wage and salary in the industry is about 35,000 for meatpacking workers, and 26,500 for poultry plant workers. And unless like in Colorado, thank you, Kim, where the state grants it, most meatpacking companies provide no paid or unpaid sick leave. Throughout the industry, employers have adopted punitive leave systems whereby a worker who is injured or ill and must miss work, even for a work-related injury, is punished with points. If the worker accumulates too many points, he or she is fired. In addition, the meatpacking industry has turned to the widespread use of temporary agencies and subcontractors to hire many of the workers in their plants. It's a way to weaken unions and to outsource their liability to comply with labor laws. It is no surprise to me that the government has found widespread use of children, some in middle school, working in corporate giants such as Tyson, JBS, Cargill, Purdue, and Seaboard in the most dangerous jobs in the plant.

Everybody knows you have to be 18 to work in these plants. So there's a wink and a nod going on as these kids are being, in some ways, I think the industry puts the word out that they'll hire them, and in they come. The industry's unsafe. And what is very disheartening is how hard it is for the Department of Labor to hold meat companies accountable, which we've heard. The industry strategically seeks to hire the most vulnerable workers, the most easily to exploit. OSHA recently found that workers in the meat plant that they were inspecting were too scared to talk to them because they were scared of being retaliated against. A recent study confirmed that workers are even too scared to report injuries in plants, fearful they must be fired. As a result of a multi-decades long effort to hire the most vulnerable, or as you heard, exploitable workers, the industry stands out for its ability to totally scare its workforce into not raising issues and not complaining.

**Leah Douglas (00:58:04)**

Thanks so much, Debbie. We just have a few minutes left because we want to be sure to be able to take some questions as well. So I just wanted to do kind of a last pass with everyone and talk about, bring us up to the present. What are either actions that your organizations are taking that you're seeing your states taking, the federal government taking to maybe try to address some of these issues? Or if not, where are there areas that should be addressed? Kim, we can start with you. I know you spoke about how Colorado, there's been some big policy changes. You could speak more about that, or are there federal issues as well that you're focused on right now?

**Kim Cordova (00:58:40)**

Yeah, I didn't mention that at our facility, they kill about 390 heads of cattle an hour upward towards 6,000 heads a day. And at very fast, the line speed is very fast. It's unreasonable and unsafe. And I think on a federal level, I know we've been trying for a long time to address line speed, but that's something that needs to be done. It's a systemic problem throughout, not just in the beef plants, but pork, poultry, lamb, very fast work. Again, I think that there needs to be on a broader level, not just state by state, but throughout the country, that for all workers there needs to be paid sick leave. The work well sick culture is dangerous and COVID just exposed that.

There's a lot of work that needs to be done. I think that there needs to be penalties to these bad employers. A fine of 13,000 or 100 thousand is pennies in a bucket. And also I believe that that's just an incentive to continue to be more unsafe. Unless there's criminal penalties and that employers are held to a criminal standard, if it's attempted murder, I don't care what it is, manslaughter, reckless, endangerment, whatever it needs to be, there needs to be stiff criminal penalties to employers that put workers' lives at risk or where workers are killed. You look at the ammonia leak, if they could have prevented that or they knew about it, then they need to be held liable. So I really hope that there's a big push and that some laws are created to hold folks accountable.

**Leah Douglas (01:00:32)**

Thinking about the legal context seems like a really good transition to you, Shelley. How does any of that sound in your context or things like this underway, or what would you see changing?

**Shelly Anand (01:00:43)**

Yeah. I mean, I think we have a lot of work to do to educate our comrades in the struggle about the realities of how weak the OSHA Act is. Kim was talking about penalty amounts. Those are set by Congress. Those are congressional limitations. So in the nitrogen leak case, we had a million dollars worth of penalties issued. And for folks like myself or Debbie who were in the government we're like, that's the maximum amount. But to the public, to those workers and their families, it's nothing. I think a big kind of eye-opening realization for me, even as someone who's former government, was the fact that we workers didn't feel safe going back to this plant. Like two weeks after the nitrogen leak, they were like, "We're opening up, come in." And OSHA does not have the authority to shut down a workplace. The Mine Safety and Health Administration, MSHA, its sister agency, can shut down a mine for accumulation of dust in the coal mine.

But OSHA cannot shut down a plant, even if there are findings of it being unsafe, even if there's finding of imminent danger, you have to litigate that. And litigation takes effort. It takes money. And the case law, at least where I live in the Eleventh Circuit, is tipped in favor of the employer. I think there's a lot of work that needs to be done around immigration. In the aftermath of the nitrogen leak, we were very adamant that these workers not face what the workers in Mississippi faced. Before the Coke food raids, a number of the workers, women had filed EEOC complaints for sexual assault, and they were in the middle of, or they reached settlement. And before those settlements were dispersed, guess what happened? A mass raid, right? And so we were terrified of that being a reality for the workers in Gainesville.

And so we pushed DHS and the Department of Labor to exercise what's called prosecutorial discretion in the form of a temporary form of relief called labor-based deferred action. And it's always been around, but it is a new exercise of discretion that basically says, if you are a worker with vulnerable immigration status, whether you're on the H-2A program in ag, or you're undocumented, or you're a highly skilled H-1B worker and you want to file a labor complaint and you're afraid to do so because you're worried that your employer's going to call ICE on you, this is a temporary form of protection that not only gives you status, but it gives you a work permit. And it's been really incredible to see what even a temporary form of relief can do for a community. It's enabled them to get better paying jobs to leave poultry or to stay and grow and become advocates. But temporary status isn't enough for folks that have built a life here.

And I think people across the political aisle, whether you're super left or super right, our country needs workers. And there are people that come to this country wanting to work. Why don't we give them work permits? Why don't we give them the ability to be here and to be documented and to, they are already contributing to our economy, but to earn the dignity and respect that they so deserve. So immigration reform in some respects needs to happen, but a baseline is work permits for all. If you're working and you're able to work, you get a work permit.

I think that's a bare minimum that we could be doing as a country that I think would get bipartisan support if we weren't treated as political pawns as immigrants and as women. But I'm

still holding out hope for that. And I think getting funding for OSHA and giving them the support they need. My desk as a litigator, I had so many cases, and they're pushed to settle. They're pushed to vacate willful citations that would result in a criminal liability. They're pushed to settle those because they're just inundated. They're not enough attorneys, they're not enough investigators. They don't have the resources. And so we as a society need to push our officials to fund this rather than funding some of the other atrocities that we're funding right now.

**Leah Douglas (01:05:29)**

Angela, just picking up on some of these more local perspectives, have there been any changes in the community that you were kind of embedded in Mississippi? What's the latest that's going on there?

**Dr. Angela Stuesse (01:05:44)**

I don't think I can speak to the latest that's going on in Mississippi because I haven't been there for quite some time, although I'm in contact with folks there. I think-

**Leah Douglas (01:05:54)**

Well, just another way to phrase it could be, I guess given what everything that you wanted, your expertise, how would you build in this conversation about what can be done, what is being done, and contextualizing that for folks?

**Dr. Angela Stuesse (01:06:06)**

I mean, I think I could talk on two ends, both about what's happening in terms of worker organizing and the piece that I see missing there that has to do with how to help folks who are not seeing eye to eye as workers because of all the strategies that the industry uses, how to help them better be able to collaborate. But I think on the other end, and I'll say this in 10 or 20 seconds, something that I've been thinking about since the pandemic is really just the need for a new ethic. And maybe this is where Shelley was ending, right? This is like a social ethic.

Corporations are accountable solely to investors and shareholders today, not to the communities in which they work or to the workers. And I think that in earlier moments, capitalism looked different than it does now. And so I guess I would sort of on the macroscale want to be pushing us to continue to imagine other ways of organizing ourselves and relating to one another and holding corporations like this accountable because it's a model that's, it's not unique to poultry and meatpacking or even to the food chain. It's being replicated all over the markets.

**Leah Douglas (01:07:26)**

Debbie, I'm curious what you would add, and also curious if you have any thoughts on how the Biden administration is doing on these issues as someone who follows it very closely?

**Debbie Berkowitz (01:07:34)**

Yeah. Well, thank goodness for the Biden administration because one thing that we haven't said here, and I know we're coming to the end, is the role that the United States Department of Agriculture has in these plans. OSHA has so few inspectors, it would take them 160 years to get into every workplace at once, but the USDA has like five times as many inspectors just for the meat and poultry industry, and they regulate line speeds in this industry. And under the Trump administration, they allowed faster speed and pork plants, and they allowed chicken plants to speed up their lines. But thank goodness to the lawsuits filed by the unions and the Biden administration who have put on hold, no more line speed increases in chicken and in pork and in cattle. And instead they launched a big study about worker safety in the industry. And I think USDA could do a lot more to improve working conditions.

And I think the Department of Labor has to hold big companies accountable for these child labor violations, because right now it's just the subcontractors that are being held accountable. And I want to just give a shout out to Minnesota who did pass a law to protect packinghouse workers and to create more requirements for meatpacking workers. And we're watching the state and for meatpacking workers safety, and we're watching the state and hoping that this will move the needle. So I'll end here. Yeah.

**Leah Douglas (01:09:03)**

Great. And just in our remaining few moments, we had one question from the audience that I thought maybe someone here would want to give insight into, which is, as consumers who eat meat, what can people be thinking about as they're going about their grocery store trying to decide what to buy or their farmer's market? Anybody want to jump on that one?

**Debbie Berkowitz (01:09:28)**

I'm jumping in here. I do think consumers have a huge role to play. I mean, as Matt said at the beginning, you were worried about chickens and their coops, and now you have free-range chickens. You need to raise your voices and use your voices about conditions in the industry, either through in the supermarkets where you buy your chicken or in fast food like McDonald's or Chick-fil-A, because all these companies can have an impact on the plants to sort of, but consumers haven't been thinking about workers or worker conditions. So if you start raising your voices and concerns, I think it will make a difference.

**Shelly Anand (01:10:12)**

Yeah. I'll just add that we could use your support. We could use consumer support on figuring out where this chicken goes. The workers know they're able to figure it out and share with us. Debbie mentioned Chick-fil-A, and Mar-Jack supplies to Chick-fil-A. And Mar-Jack is the place where a 16-year-old boy died. So do you want to eat Chick-fil-A sandwiches at a place where they allow 16-year-old kids to work and pass away?

And for FFG, I asked our community members, do you know where this chicken goes? Where do these chicken tenders go? And they said to the public schools, that these children are eating these chicken tenders. And so I think we all need to get a little curious when you're picking up

produce. I saw someone bring up the Coalition for Immokalee Workers. I would love, absolutely love to support a consumer-driven, a worker-driven social responsibility campaign, but we need the support. We need the support of consumers, we need the support of unions. We need the support of everyone because there's only so many hours in the day. And so if folks could help us track where this product ends up, where Pilgrim's Pride, we know, I know Zaxby's uses their chicken, but needing people to really invest in research and share these resources and information and support campaigns. And I think everyone has a stake in this. And so everyone has an ability to join in this fight, and we hope you'll join us.

**Leah Douglas (01:12:04)**

Wonderful. Thanks so much, everyone. This was a really fascinating discussion. And thank you so much to The Aspen Institute for having us. And I think we're throwing it back over to Matt just to close this out.

**Matt Helmer (01:12:15)**

Thank you all so much. Thank you for all the work you do, such just really meaningful, great stories you're able to tell today and such inspiration, I think, for moving this work forward. So thanks again to Leah, Debbie, Shelly, Angela, and Kim for this great conversation. Thanks to Eric Schlosser again for joining us with opening remarks. We still have one conversation left in this series. We're planning that for June 4th, so stay tuned for more information on that in the weeks ahead.

Check out our Employee Ownership Ideas Forum coming up on April 9th and 10th. We still have some space virtually to attend the forum. Thanks so much to our colleagues at Food & Society, Corby and Mary for their partnership on this series. And thanks to our great team at the Economic Opportunities Program for putting this event together. And thank you all so much. Thanks to our audience for joining and sharing your questions and comments. Remember to take that survey that's popping up here in just a second. You can always email us feedback at [eop.program@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:eop.program@aspeninstitute.org) and let us know what you think. We hope to hear from you soon, and we hope that you'll join us again soon for an upcoming conversation. Thanks again.