



## ► ILO Sectoral Brief

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# COVID-19 and its impact on working conditions in the meat processing sector<sup>1</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic is continuing to exert pressures on the agri-food industry both from the business and workers' sides, with some sectors shouldering a particularly high burden. The meat processing sector is one of them. The effects of the pandemic have rippled across the entire meat supply chain, from primary production (livestock rearing) to processing and retail, inevitably impacting businesses and workers engaged in it. As the effects of the pandemic on our food systems continue to unfold, the learnings from the particularly frequent outbreaks in processing plants in several major meat-producing countries should catalyse reforms to make meat processing and the agri-food sector at large not only resilient to such shocks in the future but also enable it to "build back better". This would be achieved by addressing the underlying decent work deficits that have incremented the meat processing industry – and its workforce's – vulnerability to the effects of the pandemic.

In some countries, the spread of the virus at processing plants has led to closures or limited operating capacity, and therefore a significant decline in the output of processed meat. This has resulted in an over-supply and lower prices of livestock, while also putting upward pressure on wholesale and retail prices of processed meat. At the same time, a sharp decline in activity in the food services industry, most severely hit by the pandemic, and reduced household incomes, has demanded an adjustment in the nature and quality of products, increasing costs, reducing revenues and creating additional logistical challenges for meat processing supply chains.<sup>2</sup>



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Meat processed for export

While disruptions and bottlenecks in agri-food supply chains caused by the pandemic have led to concerns over food availability and food safety, the agri-food sector has also faced outbreaks of COVID-19 in abattoirs and meat processing factories around the world. In the past 10 months, multiple outbreaks have been reported in major meat producing countries, including Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. In the United States, approximately 10 per cent of workers at beef and pork processing plants have tested positive for COVID-19, with the rate of infections ranging from 30 per cent to as high as 70 per cent at

<sup>1</sup> This brief focuses on countries where COVID-19 outbreaks in the meat processing sector have been reported.

<sup>2</sup> Valeria Borsellino et al., "COVID-19 drives consumer behaviour and agro-food markets towards healthier and more sustainable patterns", *Sustainability*, 12 October 2020; Katie James, "Spain's domestic demand for high-end meat dampened by COVID-19", *Pork Business*, 22 October 2020; "COVID-19 to cause further disruptions to the meat supply chain", *Supply Chain Digital*, 23 April 2020; "How the coronavirus pushes up food prices", *Retail Detail EU*, 31 August 2020; "Coronavirus sends China's meat prices opposite ways", *Financial Times*, 12 February 2020.

some plants.<sup>3</sup> China, which accounts for roughly 25 per cent of global meat consumption,<sup>4</sup> has also reported a shortage of meat and inflation in prices due to shortage of labour in slaughterhouses as workers quarantine.<sup>5</sup> In the European Union, in addition to Germany and the Netherlands, COVID-19 outbreaks have been reported in Belgium, France, Ireland, Poland and Spain, where some plants have seen 20 to 25 per cent of their workforce infected.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the situation in the Americas and Europe, no major COVID-19 outbreaks have been reported in Asia, the world's largest meat producing region. The industry there points out that early preventive measures have played a key role.<sup>7</sup>

The meat-processing segment of the meat supply chain consists of establishments for slaughtering animals and cutting, processing, packaging and distributing meat for consumption or sale. With a market of approximately US\$1.7 trillion in 2019,<sup>8</sup> meat has a prominent place in the food industry. Global meat production has quadrupled since the 1960s to meet increasing demand. In 2018, around 342 million tonnes of meat were produced globally, with three countries – China, the United States and Brazil – together producing more than half of the global meat output.<sup>9</sup> Over the past three decades, Asia has emerged as the largest producer, despite the output from Europe and North America having increased in absolute terms.<sup>10</sup>

Over time, the industry has witnessed a structural shift from small enterprises to consolidated large-scale companies for competitiveness based on efficiency and economies of scale. Yet multinational corporations still only account for less than 10 per cent of global meat production.<sup>11</sup> For example, Asia's meat industry

is increasingly shaped by large corporations, both Western multinational and emerging Asian enterprises. The current pandemic is strengthening existing trends towards industrialization and stricter hygiene standards in meat production.<sup>12</sup> In the United States, the four largest companies in beef, pork, and poultry processing represent 55 to 85 per cent of their respective market shares. The country's beef production is concentrated in 12 plants responsible for 52 per cent of all cattle slaughter, while 12 others account for over 50 per cent of pork production.<sup>13</sup> In the European Union, the top 15 companies account for 28 per cent of meat production.<sup>14</sup> Production facilities have moved from urban centres to rural areas, which are closer to livestock farms, to reduce transportation costs, address environmental concerns and benefit from the availability of labour.<sup>15</sup> Research findings from Brazil and the United States highlight that the COVID-19 pandemic has also severely affected the communities where the meat processing plants are located.<sup>16</sup>

A study on the European meat sector found that in Europe, the concentration of the industry into a few large enterprises engaged in mass production has contributed to an increasing demand for workers on production lines for standardized, small and repetitive tasks, while employing skilled labour for supervision, quality control or operation of automated machinery.<sup>17</sup> The use of modern technology and automation in the meat sector has increased over the years, though the uptake has been slow. A possible explanation could be the associated high costs, low profit margins and a high degree of variability in animal carcasses, which makes developing standardized technological solutions for

3 Cortney Cowley, "COVID-19 Disruptions in the U.S. Meat Supply Chain", in Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, 31 July 2020.

4 OECD Data, "Meat consumption in thousand tonnes", 2019. China accounts for roughly 25 per cent of total global meat consumption (beef, poultry, pig and sheep), followed by the United States (13 per cent), Brazil (7 per cent), the Russian Federation and Mexico (3 per cent each).

5 FAO, *COVID-19: Channels of transmission to food and agriculture*, May 2020.

6 "Europe's meat industry is a coronavirus hot spot", Deutsche Welle, 26 June 2020.

7 Neo Chai Chin, "Covid-19 and meat plants in Asia: A contrast in fortunes to the United States?" *Eco-Business*, 22 May 2020.

8 McKinsey & Co., "Alternative proteins: The race for market share is on", 16 August 2019.

9 FAOSTAT, 2018.

10 H. Ritchie and M. Roser, "Meat and dairy production", *Our World in Data*, 2017.

11 Eurofound, *Future of manufacturing Meat processing workers: Occupational report*, 2018; Institute of Agriculture and Trade Policy, "Mighty giants: Leaders of the global meat complex", 10 April 2018; James M Macdonald et al., "Consolidation in U.S. meatpacking", *Agricultural Economic Report No.785*, 2000; "The top 10 global meat processors account for approximately 15% of the global kill, with the next 10 accounting for a further 3%. This is a fragmented industry, with huge international variations in practice, quality, and preference, which few have managed to grow into global businesses successfully" European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions, "Putting meat on the bones A report on the structure and dynamics of the European meat industry", 2011.

12 Arve Hansen and Jostein Jakobsen, "COVID-19 and the Asian meat complex", *East ASIA Forum*, 29 September 2020.

13 Jen J. Skerritt et al., "Meat shortages reopen costly path to smaller U.S. plants", *Bloomberg*, 26 June 2020; Charles A. Taylor et al., "Livestock plants and COVID-19 transmission", *PNAS*, 19 November 2020.

14 Charles A. Taylor et al., "Livestock plants and COVID-19 transmission", *PNAS*, 19 November 2020.

15 P. Martin, "Agricultural Labor: Supply of Labor", *Encyclopedia of Agriculture and Food Systems*, 2014, 143-156; V Smil, *Should We Eat Meat?: Evolution and Consequences of Modern Carnivory*, Wiley-Blackwell, March 2013, p. 98.

16 Leah Douglas and Tim Marema, "When Covid-19 hits a rural meatpacking plant, county infection rates soar to five times the average," *Food and Environment Reporting Network*, 28 May 2020; Ana Mano, "Special Report: How COVID-19 swept the Brazilian slaughterhouses of JBS, world's top meatpacker", *Reuters*, 8 September 2020.

17 Eurofound, *Future of manufacturing Meat processing workers: Occupational report*, 2018.

handling them challenging.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, increasing automation is considered to be crucial in addressing some of the key safety and health challenges that have been brought to the fore by the current pandemic, and in ensuring the sustainable development of the sector.<sup>19</sup>

While global aggregate data for employment in the meat processing sector is not readily available, in China, in 2015, beef production alone was a source of livelihoods for some 8.7 million small producers who, slaughtering nine or fewer cattle per year, account for 90 per cent of the country's cattle operations. Large-scale enterprises use modern technology and meet middle- and high-end consumer demand.<sup>20</sup> In the United States, the industry is estimated to directly employ nearly 360,000 workers both in routine and precision functions, involving cutting, trimming, and preparing meat (as well as poultry and seafood) for use or sale.<sup>21</sup> An estimated one million people work in production, processing and preserving of meat and meat products in the European Union, including the United Kingdom, accounting for nearly 21 per cent of the total employment in the entire food, beverages and tobacco manufacturing sector in these countries.<sup>22</sup> Germany's meat industry employs 128,000 people,<sup>23</sup> while in the United Kingdom, meat processing is a source of jobs to 97,000 people.<sup>24</sup> Nearly 500,000 people work in slaughterhouses in Brazil,<sup>25</sup> while in neighbouring Argentina, the meat sector provides both direct and indirect employment to 422,000 people.<sup>26</sup> In 2018–19, the Australian red meat and livestock industry was a source of direct employment for 190,000 people. The production segment, which includes beef cattle, sheep and mixed farming and feedlots, accounted for 128,880 jobs and processing for 31,200 jobs, with the remainder in wholesaling and retailing. The industry was also responsible for generating indirect employment for 245,000 people in businesses servicing the industry (such as inputs supply, transportation, sales, animal health).<sup>27</sup>

A recent report, commissioned by Meat Business Women, shows that women make up 36 per cent of the meat industry workforce. The report, which draws on survey data from the Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States, also highlights that women hold only 14 per cent of board-level director roles and 5 per cent of chief executive roles in the industry.<sup>28</sup> In Europe, for example, there appears to be a preference for male workers.<sup>29</sup>

The fast-paced and repetitive nature of work on the production line, involving handling of animals and carcasses and the use of sharp tools, compounded by inherently difficult working conditions in general, characterized by long shifts in a cold environment, low skill requirement and low pay, have rendered retention rates in this sector low. As demand for labour varies with the demand for meat products in the market, recruitment agencies have also flourished, often recruiting migrant workers in these high-intensity, low-skill temporary jobs, which are unable to generate much interest from workers locally in developed economies.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed employment and labour challenges in the agri-food sector, including the meat processing industry, hitting producers and workers vulnerable to socio-economic risks the hardest. Thousands of workers across major meat producing countries have contracted the virus, while associated plant closures and supply chain failures are estimated to cost the industry US\$13 billion. In the United States, for example, in just the first few months of the crisis, the four largest meat producing companies were reported to have lost 25 per cent of their value.<sup>30</sup> While this policy brief is prompted and primarily informed by the recent frequent COVID-19 outbreaks in abattoirs and meat processing factories in Europe and the Americas, where virus outbreaks have been reported, the urgent need to address the systemic decent work deficits in the industry remains valid on a global scale.

18 Eurofound, *Future of manufacturing Meat processing workers: Occupational report*, 2018; British Meat Processors Association, *Labour in the meat industry*, June 2020.

19 "Covid-19 Makes the Case for More Meatpacking Robots: The coronavirus has hit meat processing plants hard. But not in Denmark, where automation makes for safer slaughterhouses", *Wired*, 25 May 2020; Robert Handfield, "Automation in the meat packing industry is on the horizon", NC State University, 9 July 2020; Jacob Bunge and Jesse Newman, "Tyson turns to robot butchers, spurred by coronavirus outbreaks", *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 July 2020.

20 Xiang Zi LI et al., "Current situation and future prospect of beef production in China", *Asian Australasian Journal of Animal Sciences* 31(7), May 2018.

21 United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational employment and wages: *Slaughterers and Meat Packers, Meat, Poultry, and Fish Cutters and Trimmers, Butchers and Meat Cutters*, May 2019.

22 EUROSTAT Statistics Explained, "Meat production and processing statistics - NACE Rev. 1.1", 2009; Food Drink Europe, *Data and trends-EU food and drinks industry*, 2018.

23 Rebecca Staudenmaier, "Germany's meat industry under fire after COVID-19 outbreaks", *Deutsche Welle*, 19 May 2020.

24 British Meat Processors Association, *Labour in the meat industry*, June 2020.

25 Reuters, "How COVID-19 swept the Brazilian slaughterhouses of JBS, world's top meatpacker", 8 September 2020.

26 "La ganadería bovina es la segunda generadora de empleo agroindustrial argentino", *Valor Carne*, 15 October 2020.

27 Meat and Livestock Australia, *State of the Industry Report: The Australian red meat and livestock industry*, 2020.

28 Global Ag Media: Women underrepresented in meat industry workforce - new report.

29 Eurofound, *Future of manufacturing meat processing workers: Occupational report*, 2018.

30 Elliot Teperman, "Why cows could be the new coal in the wake of Covid-19", *Reuters Events: Sustainable Business*, 11 June 2020.



## ► 1. COVID-19 and its impact on businesses and workers in the meat processing sector

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The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all segments of the meat supply chain and has brought changes in consumer, production and market behaviours. With large players dominating the industry in most countries, closure of processing plants due to COVID-19 outbreaks has created bottlenecks in processing and packaging and has led to oversupply and consequently lower prices for livestock. The resulting excess capacity has also led to farmers in several countries having to cull their livestock due to inability to move them to market and feed shortages.<sup>31</sup> In early 2020, for example, some 100 million chickens were slaughtered in China due to disruptions in the supply of animal feed, which affected not only poultry farmers but also feed producers, who experienced shortages of main feed ingredients.<sup>32</sup>

The reduction in the output of processed meat has led to wholesale and retail price volatility, with a surge in some countries such as China and the United States,<sup>33</sup> and a decline in prices of certain types of meat in other countries, such as Spain.<sup>34</sup> In some countries in Europe, there has been a shift in consumer behaviour towards buying healthier, more sustainable food.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, in many countries, economic uncertainty and reduced household income levels have resulted in an increased demand for inexpensive meat products over premium, high-value cut meats.<sup>36</sup> Reduced operations of restaurants and other food service businesses have further diverted consumers to purchase meat from retail outlets, demanding an adjustment in the nature

and quality of products and packaging, which has increased the logistical pressure on the value chain.<sup>37</sup>

Some of the structural and operational conditions inside meat processing plants have been found to be favourable for the transmission of the virus.<sup>38</sup> A review of 19 states in the United States found that conditions included cold and damp indoor areas, dense workspaces with prolonged close contact on the production line, cramped rest and entry–exit spaces that make physical distancing difficult, contact with potentially contaminated surfaces or objects – such as tools, workstations and break tables, inadequate ventilation systems and loud noise in factories that prompt workers to shout and thereby release more respiratory droplets.<sup>39</sup> The same study found that the labour-intensive, physically-demanding and fast-paced nature of work on the production line also makes wearing face coverings for long durations challenging.<sup>40</sup>

Multiple COVID-19 outbreaks in the sector in several highly developed and emerging economies have largely been attributed to the prevalence of jobs with inadequate labour protection and incomes, as insecure and poorly remunerated employment discourages workers from disclosing symptoms for fear of penalty or loss of income;<sup>41</sup> and, the predominance of a migrant workforce, who often lack social protection coverage and access to health care and may be unwilling to report illness or self-isolate due to a fear of losing

31 San Yu, “Coronavirus fears force China into mass chicken cull”, *Financial Times*, 17 February 2020.

32 “COVID-19 to cause further disruptions to the meat supply chain”, *Supply Chain Digital*, 23 April 2020; “How the coronavirus pushes up food prices”, *Retail Detail EU*, 31 August 2020; “Coronavirus sends China’s meat prices opposite ways”, *Financial Times*, 12 February 2020; Sun Yu et al., “China scales back meat imports over virus concerns”, *Financial Times*, 8 July 2020. See also [FAO Meat Price Index](#).

33 Katie James, “Spain’s domestic demand for high-end meat dampened by COVID-19”, *Pork Business*, 22 October 2020.

34 Valeria Borsellino et al., “COVID-19 drives consumer behaviour and agro-food markets towards healthier and more sustainable patterns”, *Sustainability*, 12 October 2020.

35 European Data Portal, “Threats to food security: Is another pandemic lingering on the horizon?”, 28 July 2020.

36 D. Laborde et al., “COVID-19 risks to global food security”, *Science*, Vol. 369, Issue 6503, July 2020, pp. 500–502.

37 Thomas Günther et al., “SARS-CoV-2 outbreak investigation in a German meat processing plant”, *EMBO Molecular Medicine*, Vol. 12, Issue 12, 7 December 2020; David Nabarro et al., “COVID in cold environments: risks in meat processing plants”, *4SD Working Paper*, 11 November 2020; BBC, “Coronavirus: Why have there been so many outbreaks in meat processing plants?”, 23 June 2020; John Middleton et al. “Meat plants—a new front line in the COVID-19 pandemic”, *BMJ* 2020; 370:m2716, 2020; Michelle A Waltenberg et al., *Update-COVID-19 among workers in meat and poultry processing facilities - United States*, April–May 2020, CDC, 10 July 2020; Charles A. Taylor et al., “Livestock plants and COVID-19 transmission”, *PNAS*, 19 November 2020; Matilda Boseley, “Coronavirus clusters: why meatworks are at the frontline of Australia’s second wave”, *The Guardian*, 22 July 2020; “Cedar Meats cluster: why abattoir workers are on the coronavirus frontline”, *The Guardian*, 9 May 2020.

38 Jonathan W. Dyal et al., “COVID-19 among workers in meat and poultry processing facilities — 19 States, April 2020”, CDC, 8 May 2020; CDC and OSHA, “Meat and poultry processing workers and employers - interim guidance from CDC and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration”, 9 July 2020.

39 Jonathan W. Dyal et al., “COVID-19 among workers in meat and poultry processing facilities — 19 States, April 2020”, CDC, 8 May 2020.

40 Quentin Durad-Moreau et al., “COVID-19 in meat and poultry facilities: a rapid review and lay media analysis”, Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine: Evidence Service to support the COVID-19 response, 4 June 2020.

41 Jonathan W. Dyal et al., “COVID-19 among workers in meat and poultry processing facilities — 19 States, April 2020”, CDC, 8 May 2020; “Europe’s meat industry is a coronavirus hot spot”, *Deutsche Welle*, 26 June 2020.

income.<sup>42</sup> Migrant workers tend to share housing and transportation, which is reportedly often overcrowded and of inadequate standard, thereby exposing themselves and their families to additional risks of virus infection.<sup>43</sup>

## Employment

Jobs in the meat processing sector are not in high demand due to the unappealing working environment. They particularly fail to attract young people, resulting in a shortage of local labour,<sup>44</sup> especially in high-income countries. A study in the United Kingdom found that low wages, physically intensive iterative work, high risk of occupational injury, and remote factory locations also make meat processing factories an unattractive workplace.<sup>45</sup> Recent COVID-19 outbreaks have brought to the fore the difficult working conditions and decent work deficits in the sector in many major meat producing countries.

As noted earlier, migrants are a significantly large part of the labour force in the sector, especially in developed countries but also in some emerging economies (such as Thailand). In Europe, they are often employed on subcontracts by recruitment agencies: nearly early 70 per cent of subcontracted workers in the United Kingdom's meat processing sector are migrants.<sup>46</sup> According to various sources, 50 to 80 per cent of Germany's meat processing workforce is migrant labour and a significant number of those workers are employed under subcontracts.<sup>47</sup>

For example, in Germany, prior to 2015, meat processing plants relied heavily on "posted" workers from eastern and Central Europe. While the country has robust labour protections for locally employed workers, these temporary and posted migrant workers were often employed by subcontractors located in their home country, and as such were exempt from social security contributions in Germany. They also often did not speak German, which created additional barriers in claiming their rights, and were not eligible to join unions or benefit from the collective agreements protecting wages and working conditions, thus creating a dual labour market.<sup>48</sup> This low-cost workforce allowed plants to increase their competitive advantage over their counterparts in other countries.<sup>49</sup> In 2015, after public outcry and government attention, the six biggest processors in Germany and the German Food, Beverages and Catering Union voluntarily agreed to make working conditions more attractive and gradually dismantle the practice of large deployments of posted workers. Nonetheless, in large companies, the overwhelming majority of the workforce is still reported to be on subcontracts,<sup>50</sup> employed through companies based in Germany.<sup>51</sup>

Service contracts, as practiced in the German meat industry, place the responsibility for managing pay, working time and other conditions of employment solely on the subcontracting agencies/companies, thereby releasing the main contractors – the processing companies – from any liability for labour rights infringements.<sup>52</sup> Monitoring and enforcement against subcontractors is difficult due to the limited reach of unions over temporary workers, as well as weak

42 "Europe's meat industry is a coronavirus hot spot", *Deutsche Welle*, 26 June 2020; Quentin Durad-Moreau et al., "COVID-19 in meat and poultry facilities: a rapid review and lay media analysis", The Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine: Evidence Service to support the COVID-19 response, 4 June 2020; EFFAT, *Covid-19 outbreaks in slaughterhouses and meat processing plants: State of affairs and proposals for policy action at EU level*, 30 June 2020.

43 Eurofound, *Future of manufacturing Meat processing workers: Occupational report*, 2018; British Meat Processors Association, *Labour in the meat industry*, June 2020.

44 British Meat Processors Association, *Labour in the meat industry*, June 2020; P. Martin, "Agricultural labor: Supply of labor", *Encyclopedia of Agriculture and Food Systems*, 2014, 143–156; Eurofound, *Future of manufacturing meat processing workers: Occupational report* 2018.

45 Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Inquiry into recruitment and employment in the meat and poultry processing sector- Report of the findings and recommendations*, March 2010.

46 "The meat industry is becoming a corona hotspot", *Fair-mobilitaet*, 2020; Rebecca Staudenmaier, "Germany's meat industry under fire after COVID-19 outbreaks", *Deutsche Welle*, 19 May 2020; EFFAT, *Covid-19 outbreaks in slaughterhouses and meat processing plants: State of affairs and proposals for policy action at EU level*, 30 June 2020.

47 Ines Wagner, *Changing regulations, changing practices? The case of the German meat industry*, Institute for Social Research, Oslo, 2016.

48 Bettina Wagner and Anke Hassel, "Posting, subcontracting and low-wage employment in the German meat industry", *Transfer* 2016, Vol. 22(2) 163–178; "Help for Eastern Europeans in Germany's meat industry", *Deutsche Welle*, 23 March 2017; V. Bogoeski, "A slaughterhouse for workers", *International Politics and Society*, 2 July 2020.

49 "The meat industry is becoming a corona hotspot", *Fair-mobilitaet*, 2020; European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions, *Covid-19 outbreaks in slaughterhouses and meat processing plants: State of affairs and proposals for policy action at EU level*, 30 June 2020.

50 Ines Wagner, *Changing regulations, changing practices? The case of the German meat industry*, Institute for Social Research, Oslo, 2016.

51 Bettina Wagner and Anke Hassel, "Labor migration and the German meat processing industry: Fundamental freedoms and the influx of cheap labor", *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114(1), January 2015, pp. 204–214.

52 K. McGauran, *The impact of letterbox-type practices on labour rights and public revenue*, SOMO, 2016.

cross-border enforcement mechanisms.<sup>53</sup> This increases the vulnerability of migrant workers to exploitative working conditions, such as longer and harder shifts, payment of less than minimum statutory wages, unpaid overtime, employment insecurity, illegal termination, sexual harassment or abuse by line managers.<sup>54</sup> In July 2020, the German Government, responding to the frequent COVID-19 outbreaks in meat processing plants, banned subcontracting of workers for core business as part of the legal reform for improving the working conditions in the sector.

## Social and labour protection

Migrant workers have been particularly vulnerable to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, as they may be excluded from the host of employment guarantees and social security benefits available for local workers, or may not have sufficient access to health protection and income support. They may be excluded from workers' compensation, health insurance, sickness and maternity benefits and unemployment protection, including emergency policy response measures such as temporary wage subsidies and cash transfers.<sup>55</sup> In some countries, national legislation may not provide for a right to sickness benefits and paid sick leave, as is the case in Ireland.<sup>56</sup>

These conditions increase these workers' vulnerability to the pandemic, as they may be reluctant to disclose symptoms of COVID-19 due to a fear of losing their

employment, income or immigration status, thereby not only putting at risk their own health but also that of co-workers. They are further susceptible to infection as they may not understand safety information and protocols, unless these are made available in their native language by their employers.<sup>57</sup> Travel restrictions imposed in emergency response to contain the pandemic may also preclude them from the opportunity to travel home for safety or in the case of loss of income or employment, putting them in double jeopardy.<sup>58</sup>

## Wages

In many countries, the meat processing industry is competitive with thin margins.<sup>59</sup> Some practices, such as deduction of high "incidental" costs for work tools, housing and accounting, on top of wages, have implications for workers' net pay.<sup>60</sup> In some countries, workers sometimes receive payment in cash, which may not be reported to the fiscal authorities, or not paid the promised overtime.<sup>61</sup> Workers may be required to pay employee taxes and other applicable national contributions, despite not having employment contracts which would entitle them to rights and benefits.<sup>62</sup>

It is argued that to increase wage floors, wages would need to be raised across various levels of workers to maintain adequate pay differentials according to skill. With reportedly prevalent thin profit margins, any increase in production costs linked to higher wages is

53 Ines Wagner, *Changing regulations, changing practices? The case of the German meat industry*, Institute for Social Research, Oslo, 2016; Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Inquiry into recruitment and employment in the meat and poultry processing sector- Report of the findings and recommendations*, March 2010; "The meat industry is becoming a corona hotspot", *Fair-mobilitaet*, 2020; "I feel worthless: workers tell of gruelling life in Dutch meat plants", *The Guardian*, 10 August 2020; J Lever and P Milbourne, "The structural invisibility of outsiders: The role of migrant labour in the meat-processing industry", *Sociology* 2017, Vol. 51(2) 306–322; Fairwork and SOMO, *Profiting from dependency - Working conditions of Polish migrant workers in the Netherlands and the role of recruitment agencies*, June 2016; Eurofound, *Future of manufacturing meat processing workers: Occupational report*, 2018.

54 ILO, *Protecting migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic Recommendations for Policy-makers and Constituents*, April 2020; ILO, "Social protection for migrant workers: A necessary response to the COVID-19 crisis", *Social Protection Spotlight*, 2020; ILO, "Sickness benefits during sick leave and quarantine: Country responses and policy considerations in the context of COVID-19", *Social Protection Spotlight*, 2020; ILO, "Unemployment protection in the COVID-19 crisis: Country responses and policy considerations", *Social Protection Spotlight*, 2020.

55 Martin Wall, "Meat sector not prepared to have sick pay scheme on table – Siptu", *The Irish Times*, 1 September 2020. ILO, "Sickness benefits during sick leave and quarantine: Country responses and policy considerations in the context of COVID-19", *Social Protection Spotlight*, 2020.

56 Corky Siemaszko, "Language barriers helped turn Smithfield Foods meat plant into COVID-19 hotspot", NBC News, 23 April 2020; Sebastian Martinez Validivia, "Language barrier hinders COVID-19 response at meat processing plants", WFYI, 6 June 2020; Matilda Boseley, "Coronavirus clusters: why meatworks are at the frontline of Australia's 'second wave'", *The Guardian*, 22 July 2020.

57 Corky Siemaszko, "Language barriers helped turn Smithfield Foods meat plant into COVID-19 hotspot", NBC News, 23 April 2020; Sebastian Martinez Validivia, "Language barrier hinders COVID-19 response at meat processing plants", WFYI, 6 June 2020; Matilda Boseley, "Coronavirus clusters: why meatworks are at the frontline of Australia's 'second wave'", *The Guardian*, 22 July 2020.

58 ILO, *Protecting migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic: Recommendations for policy-makers and constituents*, April 2020.

59 British Meat Processors Association, *Labour in the meat industry*, June 2020.

60 The Explainer Podcast, "The Explainer: What the Covid-19 clusters tell us about the meat industry in Ireland", 14 August 2020; "Germany: Romanian workers reveal dire conditions at slaughterhouses", *Deutsche Welle*, 3 July 2020; Bettina Wagner and Anke Hassel, "Labor migration and the German meat processing industry: Fundamental freedoms and the influx of cheap labor", *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114(1), January 2015, pp. 204–214; Rebecca Staudenmaier, "Germany's meat industry under fire after COVID-19 outbreaks", *Deutsche Welle*, 19 May 2020; Rachel Knaebel, "Subcontracting exploitation in the German meat industry", *Equal Times*, 30 January 2017; Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Inquiry into recruitment and employment in the meat and poultry processing sector: Report of the findings and recommendations*, London, 2010.

61 "Germany: Romanian workers reveal dire conditions at slaughterhouses", *Deutsche Welle*, 3 July 2020.

62 Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Inquiry into recruitment and employment in the meat and poultry processing sector- Report of the findings and recommendations*, March 2010.

likely to be passed down the value chain, ultimately to consumers, leading to higher food prices.<sup>63</sup>

Low wages, if coupled with a culture proscribing absenteeism, have put workers' safety in further jeopardy during the COVID-19 pandemic. As already noted, migrant workers in particular may be reluctant to be absent from work, and are less likely to report COVID-19 related symptoms in order not to jeopardize their livelihood and employment, or due to the monetary incentive to supplement their low wages.<sup>64</sup> To maintain regular labour supply, firms in the United States have offered monetary incentives for continuous attendance, or reinstated rules penalizing absenteeism.<sup>65</sup>

## Occupational safety and health

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the occupational safety and health hazards to which workers are exposed.

The environment inside meat processing plants is characterized by low temperatures and extreme levels of humidity. As indicated above, jobs in the sector involve physically demanding, repetitive tasks performed by workers along the production line, in close proximity with machines, animal carcasses and tools, over long shifts.<sup>66</sup> Occupational hazards also include high noise levels, slippery floors, repetitive and labour-intensive

limb movements for prolonged duration that often lead to musculoskeletal disorders, biological hazards including antimicrobial resistant pathogens associated with handling live animals, faeces and blood,<sup>67</sup> as well as possible psychological trauma.<sup>68</sup>

Statistics from the United Kingdom, for example, show that a slaughterhouse employee is three times more likely to experience a workplace injury than an average worker.<sup>69</sup> According to a recent report, almost 60 per cent of workers surveyed said they had been injured while working at meat plants in Ireland.<sup>70</sup> A study conducted in the US found that in 2018, 23,500 non-fatal occupational injuries and illnesses were reported in the animal slaughtering and processing industry in the United States, one of the highest among the manufacturing subsectors.<sup>71</sup> The actual number of injuries could be even higher, as occupational injuries may be underreported by workers due the fear of losing their jobs and wages, and by employers to avoid additional costs, reputational risks, inspection by concerned authorities or higher insurance premiums for workers' compensation.<sup>72</sup>

Reports and interviews with workers indicated that these risks are compounded by working practices, such as fast production lines to maximize production, long shifts, infrequent breaks, cramped resting and cafeteria facilities and the active discouragement of taking sick leave or holidays.<sup>73</sup> Workers in the United States have

63 British Meat Processors Association, *Labour in the meat industry*, June 2020.

64 Quentin Durad-Moreau et al., *COVID-19 in meat and poultry facilities: a rapid review and lay media analysis*, Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine: Evidence Service to support the COVID-19 response, 4 June 2020; "A work-while-sick culture leaves meat-plant employees fearing for their lives during the pandemic", Business Insider, 7 May 2020.

65 Bloomberg Law, "U.S. meat plants are deadly as ever, with no incentive to change", 18 June 2020; "Workers at Cargill's Alberta meat plant were offered special 'bonus' pay for perfect attendance during pandemic", Press Progress, 6 May 2020; Bloomberg, "Tyson reinstates policy that penalizes absentee workers", Quint, 4 June 2020.

66 Human Rights Watch, "When we're dead and buried, our bones will keep hurting" - Workers' rights under threat in US meat and poultry plants, 4 September 2019.

67 United States Department of Labor Occupational Safety and Health Administration, *Safety and Health Guide for the Meatpacking Industry*, 1998.

68 J. Leibler et al., "Prevalence of serious psychological distress among slaughterhouse workers at a United States beef packing plant", *Work*, vol. 57, no. 1, pp. 105–109, 2017; M. Lebowitz "A Call to Action: Psychological Harm in Slaughterhouse Workers", *The Yale Global Health Review*, January 25, 2016 in Issue 4 (Fall 2015).

69 Eurofound, *Future of manufacturing Meat processing workers: Occupational report*, 2018.

70 Migrant Rights Centre Ireland, *Working to the bone: The experiences of migrant workers in the meat sector in Ireland*, November 2020.

71 United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Numbers of nonfatal occupational injuries and illnesses by industry and case types*, 2018; "Two amputations a week: the cost of working in a US meat plant", *The Guardian*, 5 July 2018.

72 United States Government Accountability Office, *Additional data needed to address continued hazards in the meat and poultry industry*, 2016.

73 "In 2013, 15 stakeholder groups petitioned OSHA and USDA, asking OSHA to establish a "work-speed" workplace safety and health standard—a regulation that would set the number of animals or products processed per minute on a production line in relation to staffing levels—to protect workers in the meat and poultry industry. The petition also requested that USDA and OSHA ensure that worker safety be protected in any rulemaking related to line and work speeds in this industry. USDA acknowledged receipt of the petition in 2013 and officials told us the agency made several changes to the poultry inspection final rule that addressed some of the issues in the petition, namely not increasing the maximum evisceration line speed in young chicken plants. In 2015, OSHA denied the petition and cited limited resources as its reason for not conducting a comprehensive analysis and rulemaking. 68 Plant workers told us that meat and poultry plants are primarily concerned with production, and employers do not want the line to slow down even when the plant is understaffed. Industry officials we met with disagreed", United States Government Accountability Office, "Additional data needed to address continued Hazards in the meat and poultry industry", 2016; Shayla Thompson and Deborah Berkowitz: "USDA allows poultry plants to raise line speeds, exacerbating risk of COVID-19 outbreaks and risks", *Policy and Data Brief*, National Employment Law Project, 17 June 2020; Oliver Laughland and Amanda Holpuch: "We're modern slaves: How meat plant workers became the new frontline in Covid-19 war", *The Guardian*, 2 May 2020; Emiko Terazono and Andres Schipani, "How slaughterhouses became breeding grounds for coronavirus", *Financial Times*, 8 June 2020; Nino Bucci, "Meatworks and coronavirus: The 'domino effect' from Victoria's abattoirs pushing COVID-19 case numbers higher", *ABC News*, 25 July 2020.



also reported being pressured by their supervisors to keep the production line moving.<sup>74</sup>

The availability and proper use of adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), including face shields and masks,<sup>75</sup> and maintaining physical distance between workers remain major challenges in containing outbreaks, especially if line speeds are not adjusted.<sup>76</sup> Workers may also not report symptoms or avail themselves of sick leave unless proactively encouraged by supervisors and company policies.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, regulatory measures in favour of keeping the processing plants open to ensure uninterrupted food supply could further push workers towards risk, if not coupled with strict and mandatory rules of operation and their efficient enforcement.<sup>78</sup>

## Housing and transport

Migrant workers face additional risks of virus infection due to their living and transport conditions.<sup>79</sup> Low- and medium-skilled workers often live in cramped, multi-occupancy houses, without access to basic sanitation and with limited space, making social distancing and self-isolation difficult.<sup>80</sup> A study of Polish migrant workers in the Netherlands found that job insecurity

and low wages also restrict workers from finding suitable independent housing in the market.<sup>81</sup> A study conducted in the United Kingdom found that, where housing is provided by recruitment agencies, workers have reported being charged above the market rate and compelled to stay in agency-provided housing for a higher price.<sup>82</sup> The aforementioned study of Polish migrant workers in the Netherlands also found that the situation is similar for transportation, where many workers often have to bear the cost of sharing crowded vehicles provided by the agencies to drive them to the factories.<sup>83</sup> A study in Germany found that these living and transportation conditions do not allow for preventive physical distancing and hygiene measures, putting the workers at an increased risk of infection.<sup>84</sup>

## Social dialogue

Social dialogue, which includes all types of negotiation, consultation or exchange of information between or among representatives of governments, employers and workers on issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy, is an important means of improving working conditions, including workers' safety and health, productivity and wages, as well as [social security](#).

- 74 "Some workers had been prevented from visiting the toilet by their line manager. This included pregnant women, women with heavy periods, and people with bladder problems. Interviewees described the lasting impact of the humiliation of workers urinating and bleeding on themselves while working at the production line." Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Inquiry into recruitment and employment in the meat and poultry processing sector - Report of the findings and recommendations](#), March 2010; "Some workers who spoke with Human Rights Watch described constant pressure from their supervisors to keep the line moving, sometimes with insults and humiliation. To ensure production speed, some workers said that supervisors even refuse to let them use the restroom during their shift or require them to wait for replacements who may never come, and described their colleagues wearing diapers as a result." Human Rights Watch, ["When we're dead and buried, our bones will keep hurting"](#) - Workers' rights under threat in US meat and poultry plants, 4 September 2019.
- 75 Ana Mano, ["Special Report: How COVID-19 swept the Brazilian slaughterhouses of JBS, world's top meatpacker"](#), Reuters, 8 September 2020; Quentin Durad-Moreau et al., [COVID-19 in meat and poultry facilities: a rapid review and lay media analysis](#), Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine: Evidence Service to support the COVID-19 response, 4 June 2020.
- 76 France24, ["France hit by new Covid-19 outbreaks in two abattoirs"](#), 18 May 2020; ["The Food Chain's Weakest Link: Slaughterhouses"](#), *The New York Times*, 18 April 2020; ["Too much meat, hungry Americans: Tough choices in food supply"](#), *Politico*, 16 April 2020; ["Why Meatpacking Plants Have Become Covid-19 Hot Spots"](#), *Wired*, 5 June 2020; CNBC, ["CDC says 3% of workers in surveyed meat processing plants tested positive for coronavirus"](#), 1 May 2020; Shayla Thompson and Deborah Berkowitz, ["USDA allows poultry plants to raise line speeds, exacerbating risk of COVID-19 outbreaks and risks"](#), *Policy and Data Brief*, National Employment Law Project.
- 77 Taylor Telford and Kimberly Kindy, ["As they rushed to maintain U.S. meat supply, big processors saw plants become covid-19 hot spots, worker illnesses spike"](#), *The Washington Post*, 25 April 2020.
- 78 BBC, ["Coronavirus: Trump orders meatpacking plants to stay open"](#), 29 April 2020; United States Department of Labour, [Statement of enforcement policy by Solicitor of Labor Kate O'Scannlain and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for OSHA Loren Sweatt regarding meat and poultry processing facilities](#), 28 April 2020; ["We're modern slaves: How meat plant workers became the new frontline in Covid-19 war"](#), *The Guardian*, 2 May 2020.
- 79 ["Germany: Former abattoir worker 'heard colleagues crying at night'"](#), *Deutsche Welle*, 25 June 2020; ["Germany: Coronavirus exposes meat workers' plight"](#), *Deutsche Welle*, 22 June 2020; ["Coronavirus: 'Modern slavery' at the heart of German slaughterhouse outbreak"](#) *Deutsche Welle*, 11 May 2020; Fran McNulty, ["Why has the meat industry been hit so hard by Covid-19?"](#), RTE, 22 May 2020; Migrant Rights Centre Ireland, ["Working to the bone: The experiences of migrant workers in the meat sector in Ireland"](#), November 2020.
- 80 ILO, ["Social protection for migrant workers: A necessary response to the Covid-19 crisis"](#), Social Protection Spotlight, 23 June 2020; ["Living conditions of migrant workers at meat plants 'should be considered before criticism'"](#), *The Journal*, 19 May 2020.
- 81 Fairwork and SOMO, [Profiting from dependency - Working conditions of Polish migrant workers in the Netherlands and the role of recruitment agencies](#), June 2016.
- 82 Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Inquiry into recruitment and employment in the meat and poultry processing sector - Report of the findings and recommendations](#), March 20
- 83 Fairwork and SOMO, [Profiting from dependency - Working conditions of Polish migrant workers in the Netherlands and the role of recruitment agencies](#), June 2016.
- 84 Infomigrants, ["Germany's exploited foreign workers amid coronavirus"](#), 31 July 2020; CDC and OSHA, [Meat and poultry processing workers and employers - Interim guidance from CDC and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#), 9 July 2020; BBC, ["Coronavirus: Why have there been so many outbreaks in meat processing plants?"](#), 23 June 2020; EFFAT, [Covid-19 outbreaks in slaughterhouses and meat processing plants: State of affairs and proposals for policy action at EU level](#), 30 June 2020.



While in some countries, industrial relations in the sector have been described as fragmented,<sup>85</sup> in several countries workers' and employer's organizations work effectively together to address the challenges facing the sector. In Sweden, for example, a collective bargaining agreement has been established between the Food Workers' Union (LIVS) and most meat processing companies, which sets minimum terms for working hours and extra payment for overtime and inconvenient working hours. LIVS and the employer organization, the Swedish Food Federation (Livsmedelföretagen), have also developed a joint strategy on the recruitment of meat processors among refugees to overcome the shortage of new recruits. Good industrial relations also exist in Italy, where the national collective bargaining agreement establishing minimum standards on wages and protection is augmented by territorial or company-level supplementary agreements.<sup>86</sup> In addition to Italy and Sweden, effective social dialogue with union presence and sectoral collective agreements exist in Belgium and Denmark. These agreements lay down the minimum standards for wages, working hours, paid leave and overtime, and thereby provide for a better working environment than in neighbouring countries.<sup>87</sup> In Germany, on the other hand, the industry is not covered by a collective agreement, contrary to general German model of strong industrial relations between workers' and employers' organizations.<sup>88</sup>

A study covering Germany, Italy, Sweden and the United Kingdom found that employment quality and the contractual stability of meat processors' jobs in the sector vary depending on whether they are covered by collective agreements, and that the protection offered by collective agreements also varies.<sup>89</sup> Non-unionized, and in particular, migrant agency workers are not covered by collective bargaining agreements and tend to

have a high working time burden, low pay and working conditions, with inadequate work-life balance.<sup>90</sup> Reports in the United Kingdom and the European Union found that some firms consider agencies' treatment of workers when selecting suppliers, favouring those that provide decent employment conditions for their workers.<sup>91</sup> This includes the adoption of good practices, such as translating key documentation for workers to inform them about their rights and how to activate complaints mechanisms when facing harassment.<sup>92</sup>

Social dialogue, including all types of negotiation, consultation or exchange of information, are essential to ensure an effective response to the pandemic and catalyse structural changes in the industry. Workers' and employers' organizations have also been quick to mobilize in response to frequent COVID-19 outbreaks in processing plants. Employers' associations, for instance, have partnered with government and private entities to launch information campaigns and health certification protocols to protect workers and ensure the continuation of business operations and meat product supplies.<sup>93</sup> Workers organizations have contributed through campaigns and legal action calling on plants to comply with safety standards before reopening, increase wages, provide masks and protective gear to workers, and to ensure accountability of action from governments and employers.<sup>94</sup>

85 Eurofound, *Future of manufacturing meat processing workers: Occupational report*, 2018.

86 Eurofound, *Future of manufacturing meat processing workers: Occupational report*, 2018.

87 EFFAT, *Covid-19 outbreaks in slaughterhouses and meat processing plants: State of affairs and proposals for policy action at EU level*, 30 June 2020; Eurofound, *Future of manufacturing meat processing workers: Occupational report*, 2018.

88 Eurofound, *Future of manufacturing meat processing workers: Occupational report*, 2018; Ines Wagner, *Changing regulations, changing practices? The case of the German meat industry*, Institute for Social Research, Oslo, 2016.

89 Eurofound, *Future of manufacturing meat processing workers: Occupational report*, 2018.

90 Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Inquiry into recruitment and employment in the meat and poultry processing sector- Report of the findings and recommendations*, March 2010; Eurofound, *Future of manufacturing meat processing workers: Occupational report*, 2018; Migrant Rights Centre Ireland, *Working to the bone: The experiences of migrant workers in the meat sector in Ireland*, November 2020.

91 Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Inquiry into recruitment and employment in the meat and poultry processing sector - Report of the findings and recommendations*, March 2010; Eurofound, *Future of manufacturing meat processing workers: Occupational report*, 2018.

92 Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Inquiry into recruitment and employment in the meat and poultry processing sector- Report of the findings and recommendations*, March 2010.

93 "FECIC unveils first protocol for the Spanish meat industry to avoid risks posed by Covid-19", Food Navigator, 7 July 2020; *Agreement establishing an alliance between the Occupational Safety and Health Administration*, US Department of Labor and the North American Meat Institute, 29 July 2020.

94 IUF, "IUF Covid-19 demands : Meat + poultry processing", 23 September 2020; EFFAT, "Hungry for fairness: raising standards in the meat sector", 18 September 2020; CBC, "Union takes legal action to stop Cargill meat-packing plant from reopening amid COVID-19 outbreak", 1 May 2020; United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, "America's largest meatpacking union calls on White House for real accountability and action to protect workers on frontlines of COVID-19 pandemic", 12 September 2020; United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, "Essential workers deserve hazard pay during COVID-19", 2020; "Ranchers, labor union call for stronger Covid-19 protections for meatpacking workers", *Successful Farming*, 6 September 2020.

## ► 2. Constituents responses and good practices

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Governments and social partners have responded with accelerated efforts to address and mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the meat processing sector, ranging from structural legal reforms in the meat processing industry to collaborative initiatives to ensure safety of workers.

In July 2020, Germany introduced a law banning the subcontracting of workers for core businesses in the meat processing industry to address not only the immediate criticism following multiple COVID-19 outbreaks but also the systemic decent work deficits prevalent in the sector. Companies with more than 50 employees will now only be allowed to hire subcontracted workers for non-essential business functions, such as cleaning. Applicable from 2021, this law also lays down stricter regulation for wages, shared housing, increased inspections, electronic recording of working hours, payment for overtime, as well as collective agreements.<sup>95</sup>

One of the largest meat processing companies in Germany, in line with the legal reform, has committed to stopping the use of third party recruitment services in core meat processing tasks by the end of 2020. It declared that it would employ 1,000 people directly in a pilot scheme, and would digitize time logging by September 2020 to implement workflows and processes, and improve the housing and working conditions of the direct employees.<sup>96</sup>

Governments have introduced fiscal stimuli and other policies to alleviate the debilitating pressures on meat supply chains. The European Commission, as part of its exceptional measures to support the agri-food sector, has proposed granting private storage aid for dairy and meat products to optimize the available supply on the market and rebalance the market in the long term.<sup>97</sup>

In Ontario, Canada, the Federal and provincial governments have invested US\$2.25 million to ensure safe working conditions and continued supply of healthy meat products in provincially licensed meat processing plants. The funds will support the Agri-food Workplace Protection Program in implementing

COVID-19 health and safety measures in meat plants, including purchasing PPE, redesigning workstations, and supporting workers through the provision of isolation facilities and transportation.<sup>98</sup>

The United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention and the Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration have released [joint guidance for prevention of transmission in meat processing plants](#), giving detailed advice on the measures to be taken by employers to mitigate the risk of transmission in processing factories. In addition to social distancing measures, staggered and leaner shifts and strict cleanliness and hygiene, the guidance also recommends analysing sick leave policies to encourage workers to stay home when sick without the fear of penalty or retaliation. Emphasis is also placed on educating and training employees and supervisors on ways to reduce the spread of the virus and make the information available easily and in appropriate languages. A facility [assessment checklist](#) for use by occupational safety and health professionals to assess a facility's COVID-19 control plan has also been published on the basis of this document. These guidelines have been adapted by various States. In Illinois, for instance the establishment of a health and safety committee, consisting of labour management representatives, has been proposed, to discuss recommendations, actions and workplace protections and rights. The use of incentives for work attendance and penalties for absence for reasons related to COVID-19 has also been discouraged.<sup>99</sup> In North Carolina, daily communication with workers has been recommended to inform them of the number of confirmed cases and update them on measures taken for their safety, along with and provision of isolation housing for symptomatic workers who cannot isolate in their own homes.<sup>100</sup> In [Minnesota](#), the Preparedness Plan Requirements Guidance – Meatpacking, as well as following the joint guidance, has emphasized the responsibility of “host” businesses (such as meat processing factories) to ensure that all subcontractors and staffing agencies managing workers develop and provide the host business a written COVID-19 business preparedness plan addressing the

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95 Reuters, “[Germany cracks down on slaughterhouse sub-contracting to fight coronavirus](#)”, 22 July 2020; “[Germany agrees stricter meat industry regulations following coronavirus outbreaks](#)”, *Deutsche Welle*, 20 May 2020.

96 Tönnies, “[Immediate program for work contracts on the way](#)”, 10 July 2020; Tönnies, “[History of pandemic protection measures at Tönnies](#)”, 28 July 2020.

97 European Commission, “[Commission announces exceptional measures to support the agri-food sector](#)”, 22 April 2020.

98 Government of Canada, “[Canada and Ontario take additional steps to protect agri-food workers during COVID-19](#)”, 8 May 2020.

99 State of Illinois, Department of Public Health, [Guidance for food and meat processing facilities](#), 4 June 2020.

100 State of North Carolina, Department of Health and Human Services, [Interim COVID-19 recommendations for food processing facilities adapted from CDC/NIOSH recommendations](#), 20 April 2020.

COVID-19 protocols and practices specific to their workers and work activities.

Similar guidelines have been introduced in Ireland, along with a suggestion of organizing workers into “pods” or groups, the members of which work together, take their breaks together, change together and as far as possible even travel to work together, to allow key workers being excluded at the same time.<sup>101</sup> In the wake of multiple outbreaks, periodic testing of meat plant workers was also introduced, initially in high risk areas, and subsequently nationwide.<sup>102</sup>

In Italy, a trilateral agreement between the Government, unions and employers’ organizations was concluded in March 2020 to impose clear precautionary measures to contain outbreaks of COVID-19. This led to the unions reaching several agreements on implementing those measures at the company level.<sup>103</sup>

In the United States, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) has successfully negotiated wage increases and the implementation of safety protocols with two meat processing giants – JBS and Cargill – to improve conditions for essential workers during the coronavirus outbreak.<sup>104</sup> It has also called on the United States Congress to slow line speeds in meat processing plants to reduce the risk of occupational injury to workers and allow them an opportunity to practise social distancing.<sup>105</sup>

In the United States, [the Safe Line Speeds in COVID-19 Act](#) to suspend any waivers related to line speeds in meat and poultry establishments and inspection staffing requirements for such establishments was introduced in the Senate in July 2020,<sup>106</sup> with companion legislation subsequently introduced in the House of Representatives. The Act is currently before the Subcommittee on Livestock and Foreign Agriculture.<sup>107</sup>

The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations (IUF) – a global federation of trade unions with members in a variety of industries, including agriculture and food processing – has

developed [demand guidance](#) tailored to meat and poultry processing, underscoring the urgency to address the occupational health and safety crises brought about for workers by frequent outbreaks of COVID-19, with the prevailing decent work deficits in the sector as the underlying cause.

The European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions (EFFAT) has produced a list of ten demands for action at the European Union level, emphasizing *inter alia* a European Union-wide initiative regulating the use of subcontracting in the sector and a legally binding instrument to ensure decent housing for all mobile workers moving within the European Union.<sup>108</sup>

The North American Meat Institute (NAMI), an association of meat processing companies in the United States, has entered into a two-year [agreement](#) with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to increase awareness and outreach to protect workers from COVID-19 by developing information on recognizing coronavirus transmission risks, identifying challenges for exposure control and best practices for preventing transmission in processing facilities, among others.

Some of the prominent meat processing companies in the United States, in addition to ramping up testing facilities and preventive measures to protect workers, have introduced plans to establish medical clinics in vicinity of processing plants.<sup>109</sup> These will not only contribute to mitigating the risks associated with COVID-19, but will also improve the general health of workers. Easy access to quality medical care for workers will further contribute to reducing the costs associated with emergency treatments, as well as improve productivity.<sup>110</sup>

The Spanish Business Federation of Meat and Meat Industries (FECIC), in partnership with a leading risk consulting firm and a certification body, has made efforts to issue the first safety protocol for the Spanish meat industry to ensure worker safety, continued and smooth-running business operations and client and consumer confidence in

101 Ireland Health Protection Surveillance Centre, “[Outbreak control in meat factories](#)”, 16 September 2020.

102 “[Serial testing programme to be introduced in meat plants](#)”, *Irish Farmers Journal*, 11 August 2020; “[Taoiseach: Serial testing at meat factories to resume next week](#)”, *The Irish Examiner*, 11 September 2020.

103 EFFAT, [Covid-19 outbreaks in slaughterhouses and meat processing plants State of affairs and proposals for policy action at EU level](#).

104 IUF, “[UFCW wins breakthrough agreement with Cargill](#)”, 23 July 2020; IUF, “[UFCW wins agreement on improved protection, conditions at JBS](#)”, 23 April 2020.

105 IUF, “[UFCW calls on U.S. Congress to slow production speeds in meatpacking plants](#)”, 16 July 2020.

106 “[Booker introduces bill to boost safety and protect meatpacking workers from COVID-19](#)”, 28 July 2020.

107 H.R.7521 - [Safe Line Speeds in COVID-19 Act](#); The Humane Society of the United States, “[New federal bill seeks to stop high-speed animal slaughter and meat processing during COVID-19](#)”, 9 July 2020.

108 EFFAT, “[Hungry for fairness: raising standards in the meat sector](#)”, 18 September 2020.

109 “[Tyson Foods to open medical clinics at some meat plants](#)”, *The Washington Post*, 3 September 2020.

110 “[Tyson Foods to open medical clinics at some meat plants](#)”, *The Washington Post*, 3 September 2020.

## ► ILO Sectoral Brief:

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companies meeting the relevant legal requirements and implementing best practices.<sup>111</sup>

The Government of the United Kingdom has issued [guidelines on how to work safely in the food manufacturing sector during the COVID-19 pandemic](#). Guidance has also been issued by the British Meat Processors Association, which recommends increasing the frequency with which factories are cleaned, isolating symptomatic staff, introducing staggered start times and break times, and providing additional PPE, such as visors.

In Ireland, the Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union and Meat Industry Ireland have agreed a [wide-ranging safety protocol](#) aimed at suppressing COVID-19 outbreaks at meat processing plants. The

protocol includes a commitment to maintain serial testing of workers, continuous health screening, temperature testing, the mandatory use of PPE, and stringent hygiene controls. Joint employer-worker forums will be established in several areas to ensure full compliance with these measures.

In Spain, a major meat producing [company](#) was accredited by the Directorate-General of Health Assistance of the Government of Aragón to conduct COVID-19 diagnostic tests in its internal laboratory. This license enables the company to do periodical screenings both on its employees and new recruits, and to perform tests on surfaces, tools, packing materials and meat pieces, thereby increasing control and prevention of the virus.

## ► 3. ILO tools and responses

Fundamental principles and rights at work apply to all workers, including those in the meat processing industry. ILO Member States have an obligation to respect, promote and realize those fundamental principles and rights, and to comply with the ILO Conventions that they have ratified. In addition to the eight fundamental Conventions, which include the [Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention](#), 1948 (No. 87), [Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention](#), 1949 (No. 98); [Discrimination \(Employment and Occupation\) Convention](#), 1958 (No. 111) and [Equal Remuneration Convention](#), 1951 (No. 100), instruments of particular relevance to the meat processing industry in the context of the current pandemic include those related to OSH. These are: the [Occupational Safety and Health Convention](#), 1981 (No. 155), [Occupational Health Services Convention](#), 1985 (No. 161), [Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention](#), 2006 (No. 187), and their corresponding [recommendations](#). Upholding the standards enshrined in those instruments, requires, among other things, risk assessments, a hierarchy of controls to eliminate hazards or reduce risks, and the establishment of occupational safety and health committees that include workers' representatives, as set out in the [ILO Guidelines on Occupational Safety and Health Management Systems](#).

The ILO has also issued a [policy framework on tackling the economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic](#), based on international labour standards. The framework's key policy messages for response to the crisis around four pillars to facilitate a recovery that is sustainable and equitable. These four pillars are:

- Stimulating the economy and employment;
- Supporting enterprises, jobs and incomes;
- Protecting workers in the workplace;
- Relying on social dialogue for solutions.

[ILO Standards and COVID-19](#): FAQ - Key provisions of international labour standards relevant to the evolving COVID-19 outbreak.

The ILO has adopted a series of instruments and tools that provide a valuable framework for emergency response measures and the longer-term sustainable development of the meat processing sector:

The [Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation](#), 2017 (No. 205), emphasizes that crisis responses need to ensure respect for all human rights and the rule of law, including respect for fundamental principles and rights at work and international labour standards.

<sup>111</sup> "FECIC unveils first protocol for the Spanish meat industry to avoid risks posed by Covid-19", *Food Navigator*, 7 July 2020.



## Migrant workers

The ILO's body of standards on migration, including the [ILO fundamental conventions](#), the [Migration for Employment Convention \(Revised\)](#), 1949 (No. 97) and the [Migrant Workers \(Supplementary Provisions\) Convention](#), 1975 (No. 143) on the protection of migrant workers and the governance of labour migration, and accompanying [Recommendations Nos. 86 and 151](#) provide tools both for home and host countries to manage migration flows and ensure adequate protection for workers.

## Recruitment

The [Private Employment Agencies Convention](#), 1997 (No. 181) recognizes the important role that private employment agencies may play in a well-functioning labour market, and sets general parameters for the regulation, placement and employment of workers by private employment agencies and, in particular, temporary work agencies. The Convention and the [Private Employment Agencies Recommendation](#), 1997 (No. 188) emphasize worker's rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining as well as the need for adequate protection in relation to, among others: minimum wages; working time and other working conditions; statutory social security benefits; occupational safety and health, including compensation in cases of occupational accidents and diseases; and, maternity protection and benefits.

The [Employment Relationship Recommendation](#), 2006 (No. 198) covers: the formulation and application of a national policy for establishing the scope of relevant laws and regulations that would guarantee effective protection for workers who perform work in the context of an employment relationship; the determination of the existence of such a relationship; and the establishment of a mechanism for monitoring developments in the labour market and the organization of work. It recommends that national policies pay particular attention to ensuring effective protection for workers uncertain of the existence of an employment relationship, including women workers, as well as the most vulnerable workers, including, among others, migrant workers and workers in the informal economy.

The ILO's [General principles and operational guidelines for fair recruitment and definition of recruitment fees and related costs](#) present a comprehensive approach to realizing fair recruitment through the development, implementation and enforcement of laws and policies

aiming to regulate the recruitment industry and protect workers' rights. The principles and guidelines refer to governments' obligations to respect, protect and fulfil internationally recognized human rights, including fundamental principles and rights at work, and other relevant international labour standards in the recruitment process both within and across national borders, [including in conflict and crisis situations](#). The principles and guidelines stipulate that "Enterprises and public employment services are responsible for respecting human rights when recruiting workers, including through due diligence assessments of recruitment procedures, and should address adverse human rights impacts with which they are involved". Labour recruiters recruiting workers in one country for employment in another should respect human rights, including fundamental principles and rights at work, in compliance with international law, the law in the country of origin, the country of transit and the country of destination, and international labour standards.<sup>112</sup>

## Social protection

The [Social Security \(Minimum Standards\) Convention](#), 1952 (No. 102) sets out key principles for social security systems, as well as minimum requirements for each of the nine branches, including medical care, sickness benefits, unemployment benefits, and employment injury benefits.

The [Social Protection Floors Recommendation](#), 2012 (No. 202), promotes a universal and progressive approach to the extension of social protection for all. It promotes the extension of social protection by guaranteeing access to essential health care and basic income security at a nationally defined minimum level for all, in accordance with the guidance set out in ILO social security standards.

## Wages

The ILO conventions on wages, in particular the [Protection of Wages Convention](#), 1949 (No. 95) and the [Equal Remuneration Convention](#), 1951 (No. 100), promote regular payment of fair and reasonable wages to workers and equal remuneration for work of equal value.

## Working hours

The ILO conventions governing working time, including the [Forty-Hour Week Convention](#), 1935 (No. 47) and the [Reduction of Hours of Work Recommendation](#), 1962 (No.

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112 ILO, [General principles and operational guidelines for fair recruitment and definition of recruitment fees and related costs](#), 2019.

116), promote workers' physical and mental well-being as well as high productivity by setting out principles, such as the 40 hour working week, the provision for at least 24 consecutive hours of rest every seven days, and for annual paid holiday.

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