



Weak labour standards: the scandal behind the horsemeat scandal

While food manufacturers across Europe are implementing DNA testing programs to discover which species of animals make up their meat ingredients, the root causes of serial food safety scandals continue to be ignored.

Looking for criminals is essential but will not alter the fundamental food security risks in the global food system. Government and industry spokespeople now occasionally acknowledge that multiple layers of outsourcing make it tough to monitor the links in the supply chain, but the links with employment in that increasingly outsourced chain are ignored. The lengthening supply chains rest on lengthening chains of exploited, vulnerable and precarious workers. Protecting the workers who are guardians of food safety in their day to day tasks is even tougher when they work for a range of agencies and contractors. For agricultural and food workers to fulfill their role in protecting public health and the public interest, they must have the right to organize.

The latest food scandal should come as no surprise. For the last two decades, the IUF has consistently identified the forces which create food safety risk in the global food system. In the meat industry, deregulation, outsourcing and weakening protection for trade union and workplace rights were behind the brainwasting BSE and mad cow disease in the 1990's, just as they underpin the countless salmonella and e-coli poisonings and product recalls over recent decades.

Now, in 2013 we have another food safety scandal and corporations and regulators are repeating the same failed prescriptions and public relations excuses.

Ensuring food safety requires social protection and market regulation. Left to its own devices the market concentrates resources and power and encourages a competitive downward spiral – on payments to suppliers, wages and workplace health and safety. Social devastation is the real cost of cheap food.

The right to safe food cannot be separated from rights for those who produce the world's food. The intensification of work, the increasingly precarious nature of that work, dangerous and unhealthy workplaces and the absence of trade unions and collective bargaining are the root causes of food safety risk. A rights based approach to food production backed up by strong regulation and enforcement are the critical elements in an integrated approach to food safety, and it is these elements which are consistently overlooked by food companies, supermarkets and governments in their prescriptions to reduce risk after every predictable scandal.

For safe food to be treated as the highest priority by growers, processors, manufacturers and consumers, the role played by workers in growing and processing this food must be considered an integral part of ensuring food safety.

In its 2002 publication [The WTO and the world food system - A trade union approach](#) the IUF highlighted the risks of the greater deregulation and reduced social protection

advocated by the World Trade Organization (WTO) in relentlessly pursuing a world trading system that favors the interests of the large corporations.

“Whether it concerns hazardous pesticides or the speed up of production lines, protection of the right to safe food begins not on the shelf, but in the fields and factories.

“The doubling and tripling of slaughter and processing line speeds in recent decades has also been the principle vector for spreading the pathogens behind the rising incidence of meat related food poisoning. The production system that places worker health and safety at risk also contributes to unsafe food. The right to safe food therefore cannot be separated from the right of food processing workers to organize and bargain collectively to ensure a safe work environment.”

At its 24th Congress in May 2002, the IUF declared that:

“The rapid concentration of business customers for the food industry (mainly the globalized retail chains and fast food and catering operations) puts constant pressure on suppliers by requiring continuous reductions in price, thereby encouraging some suppliers to compromise quality and safety. The same intensification and concentration causes a deterioration in working conditions for workers in the food processing and catering industries through the speeding up of production and serving lines and demands for excessive overtime work.”

The Congress reaffirmed the “strong connection between food safety and workers’ rights on the job ensured by strong trade unions. Workers who have the right to speak out about workplace problems or unsanitary conditions without fear of reprisal or harassment are a better bulwark against food-borne pathogens. Workers who are respected and treated fairly are likely to stay in their jobs long enough to gain experience and help newer employees learn and adhere to safe food handling practices. Workers who are treated respectfully will care about the well-being of the customers they serve. A strong union presence in the workplace and in society, strengthened through active links with consumer and other groups...is the best guarantee of consumer health and safety”

In March 2006, the IUF highlighted the link between workers’ rights, working conditions, food safety and public health in the wake of the spread of avian influenza (H5N1).

Once again it was pointed out that workers “are also in the best position to determine whether minimum food safety standards are being implemented”. Highlighting the direct link between working conditions, workers’ rights, food safety and public health, the IUF observed that “increased line speeds in poultry meat processing operations makes the safe disposal of the internal organs, blood and feces of poultry and adequate cleaning of carcasses impossible, increasing the risk of fecal contamination

in processed poultry meat” ([Avian influenza and the food chain: the link between workers’ rights, working conditions, food safety and public health](#)).

By the time of the melamine scandal of 2008, multiple layers of outsourcing had been so entrenched by the major food companies that the consumer no longer knew where the ingredients or even the finished product of their favorite brands were sourced.

“Consumers loyal to the brands would also continue to believe that their favorite Kraft, Nestlé or Unilever products were made by... Kraft, Nestlé or Unilever. The global branding exercise provided a convenient cover for these companies to outsource a significant portion of production to third party contractors, known as ‘co-packers’, to manufacture their branded products.” The article drew attention to the evidence that one of the melamine-contaminated Nestlé Purina pet food products recalled in North America in 2007, after thousands of pets were sickened or died, was made by just such a North American co-packer ([Melamine milk contamination exposes reality of global brands](#)).

Outsourcing production and distribution means outsourcing quality control. No army of auditors can replace workers who have decent jobs and thus a stake in their industry. Food safety is linked to the quality of the jobs and the work environment in which the product is processed or manufactured.

The UK Environment Secretary and the UK Food Safety Authority (FSA) have not moved beyond blaming criminal and fraudulent activity in the ongoing horsemeat scandal. While the authorities ponder testing regimes, the IUF again calls on employers and governments to tackle the real cause of the problem - low pay, contract labour and unscrupulous employers profiting from the widespread violation of food workers’ fundamental human rights.

It is time policymakers tasked with ensuring food safety turned their attention to the situation of the food worker, often a migrant worker absent from his or her family, earning poverty wages, working for an agency and frightened to speak up for fear of losing any livelihood. Strengthening trade union rights and rolling back the role of precarious work in undermining union organization, workplace and product safety must be at the center of regulatory policy.

The IUF calls for stronger regulation of food safety through:

- Tougher national employment regulation which specifically promotes and protects the right to join a union and bargain collectively for all workers;
- Strict ergonomic standards to protect the health and safety of all food workers;
- Regulation to limit the growth of precarious work;
- Comprehensive and transparent reporting systems for the food supply chain, including clear identification of all contract manufacturers
- Enhanced labour and food safety inspection and enforcement regimes, and the inclusion of union representatives in these regimes at all levels;

- Regulation that protects 'whistleblowers'.

Workers organized into unions and collective bargaining backed up by strong legislation must set the standards to enable food safety to be appropriately monitored by workers with the confidence and security to speak out on any abusive or fraudulent practices.

The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) is an international trade union federation composed of 387 trade unions in 120 countries with an affiliated membership of over 2.6 million members. It is based in Geneva, Switzerland.



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