

# Unions are organising for safer, healthier, decent work [www.28april.org](http://www.28april.org)

## World of trouble

Worldwide, poor working conditions kill a worker every 11 seconds. All these deaths are avoidable, yet the body count is increasing, warns **Sharan Burrow**. The **ITUC** General Secretary says that is why global unions are launching a reinvigorated and urgent organising campaign to demand safety, justice and accountability.

Every work-related death is avoidable. We have the knowledge. We have the technology. We can live for months in the vacuum of space.

But back on earth, the number of workers killed by their jobs has risen sharply. That is not because of a lack of know-how. It is because of a lack of will.

Companies are judged on their annual accounts, not their accident books. Corporate CEOs are richly and legally rewarded for asset stripping, job slashing, outsourcing and profit-taking. It takes nothing short of a major disaster, however, to see workers' health and safety generate a murmur of concern in most boardrooms.

And that disinterest or disdain comes at a cost. It is why **estimates from the International Labour Organisation**, released in September 2017, showed work-related fatal injuries and diseases worldwide have increased to 2.78 million per year. Most - 2.4 million deaths per year – are the **result of occupational diseases**, not 'accidents'.

It is a preventable epidemic that sees one work-related death every 11 seconds, every day, round the clock. ILO puts the estimated cost of this haemorrhage of life at 3.94 per cent of global GDP per year, or 2.99 trillion US dollars.

Make no mistake, these are large under-estimates. Work associations with diseases are missed, either by accident or design, and for whole categories of conditions no-one is counting the bodies.

In Japan, the authorities may record your fatal **heart attack** as caused by overwork. In most other places, it's in the 'natural causes' column. In Germany, Italy, Denmark and France, your laryngeal cancer may be linked to asbestos and compensated, but it is likely to go unrecognised, uncounted and uncompensated in most other countries.

## Getting worse

While much of the burden of poor health and safety standards will be borne by workers in developing nations, the erosion of protective regulations and enforcement has seen disturbing changes in some of the richer industrialised nations.

Both the USA and Australia have reported the re-emergence of 'black lung', a choking and often fatal disease of coal miners and one of the first recognised occupational diseases. A February 2018 report in the [Journal of the American Medical Association](#) (JAMA) described the 'largest ever' cluster of advanced black lung disease in the US coal belt. More worrying still, working conditions were so bad these miners were falling sick and dying at a much younger age and after fewer years in the mines.

There has also been [alarm in Australia](#) at the [return of black lung](#), a condition thought eradicated in the country six decades earlier. [Mining union CFMEU](#) fears many cases have gone undiagnosed because of a near total absence of the expertise required to even diagnose the condition.

A dearth of official scrutiny was also allowing potentially deadly practices to persist, the union said. "Lack of independent monitoring of dust levels in coalmines and companies being able to self-report has led to dust levels being well above legal limits" in many mines, it noted.

In addition to old diseases, there are new threats. Novel substances like nanomaterials, introduced without adequate regard for health effects, could cause a new generation of work-related disorders.

An explosion in temporary work and subcontracting and the emergence of the 'gig economy' have created a workforce bearing all of the risks with few of the benefits. In the words of [Jessica Martinez of the US National Council for Occupational Safety and Health](#): "It's essentially the Tinder economy. When a temp worker is done with his or her shift, the boss swipes left and claims to have no further obligation."

As more technology permeates the workplace, every aspect of [our performance is scrutinised](#), questioned and required to improve. Privacy is history in ['digitalised' workplaces](#), as devices from [ultrasonic wristbands](#) to [facial monitoring](#) and [phone tracking](#) make [surveillance routine on the job](#).

We used to police the workplace; now we police the worker.

## Desperate consequences

One consequence of changes in the way people work is the emergence of new occupational epidemics caused by work-related despair. Studies in the [United States](#), [Australia](#), [France](#), [Japan](#), [China](#), [India](#) and [Taiwan](#) point to a steep rise in [work suicides](#), linked to factors including job insecurity and work overload.

The headline-grabbing sexual harassment cases in politics, the media and entertainment have illustrated how it is the old-fashioned abuse of power and not some accidental oversight or gap in knowledge that makes many workplaces damaging places to be.

Sexual harassment is an everyday fact of working life for many women, too ordinary to interest the media and too scared or concerned for their jobs to call for help. It is a form of workplace violence that demonstrates clearly the crucial role of unions in making workplaces safe places.

A study by [London School of Economics \(LSE\)](#) professors Sarah Ashwin and Naila Kabeer found organisations working in partnership with local trade unions are more likely to succeed in addressing sexual harassment and violence.

They say global codes of conduct, by comparison, have proven ineffective. "Where legal protection is weak or absent, a code of conduct will clearly be harder to enforce. But even in the presence of a suitable legal framework, a code of conduct is not a very effective tool for redressing a power imbalance," they note.

But unions did work, they said, citing research by [Tufts University](#). This found that collective bargaining agreements had a direct impact on reducing concerns regarding sexual harassment and verbal abuse, improving worker satisfaction with the outcomes of complaints and encouraging workers to raise concerns with trade union representatives.

The LSE academics concluded: “Working in partnership with local trade unions or worker representatives to address sexual harassment and violence is more likely to bring success than top-down initiatives. Such approaches offer women a protected voice which is the best antidote to the shaming and silencing that comes with sexual abuse.”

Unions have fought for and won a series of laws across the US to prevent sexual harassment of hotel workers. These are the direct result of organised and vocal union campaigns, including the [Hands Off Pants On](#) ordinance won by the union UNITE HERE in Chicago. Securing better, more protective laws is a clear illustration of the [union effect](#).

## Getting organised

If it works for sexual harassment, it will work for other forms of violence and hazardous exposures and practices at work.

The tactics used by US hotel workers’ union, UNITE HERE - mobilising the grassroots and piling on the political pressure - deliver results whatever the issue. In California, the ‘Hotel Housekeeping Musculoskeletal Injury Prevention’ standard was passed at a January 2018 meeting attended by hotel housekeepers from across the state. Nearly 300 UNITE HERE members from seven metropolitan areas contributed to the lawmaking process.



**WINNING WOMEN** Health and safety has been a major organising focus for hotel workers’ union Unite Here in the USA. Its members have mobilised to win a succession of laws protecting hotel workers from sexual harassment and occupational injuries and diseases.

Photo: Antonio Mendoza, UNITE HERE



It is why this year on 28 April - **International Workers' Memorial Day**, the global union safety day of action – the union-selected global theme is 'Union workplaces are safer workplaces'.

It is not just about asking for improvements. It is about having the collective voice and industrial power to demand them. Whether it is routine workplace or sector-wide concerns or headline grabbing disasters, the **union safety effect** is in evidence.

A study published in 2015 in the journal **Organization** concluded when firms embroiled in deadly workplace disasters improve their safety performance, it is primarily because of the heat they feel from unions and campaigners.

Co-author Julianne Reinecke, associate professor of organisational behaviour at the University of Warwick, examined several major incidents including the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh, and found "the real change came about thanks to the increasingly organised alliance of unions and campaign groups."

The campaign after the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse, in which over 1,100 workers perished, led to the union-brokered **Bangladesh Accord**. The innovative deal saw major global brands underwrite the cost of training for workers, the **creation of hundreds of joint labour-management safety committees** and **remedial safety work in hundreds of Bangladesh garment factories**, according to the Accord's January 2018 milestones update.

A **second phase of the Bangladesh Accord** commences in May 2018.

In Britain the TUC, which throughout 2018 is marking the **40th anniversary of Safety Representatives and Safety Committees**, said **proven benefits of safety reps** include an injury rate in firms with union health and safety committees that is half that in firms managing safety without unions.

A report from the British national union federation, which has produced a suite of **organising for health and safety resources**, noted fatalities are also lower in unionised workplaces. And it points to a 2016 study using UK government statistics that calculated the prevention of workplace injuries and work-related ill-health due to unions contributed savings of £219m-£725m (over US\$1bn) a year.

The US national union federation AFL-CIO, **linking higher union density to better safety**, said: "Over the past 45 years, unions have won national and state safety and health protections for all working people, including key standards such as asbestos, benzene, lead, confined spaces and fall protection; and now more than 532,000 working people can say their lives have been saved through this law."

In its 2016 report, AFL-CIO noted workers in states with **anti-union 'right to work' laws** are at a **49 per cent greater risk of dying on the job**, while US states with **greater union density** tended to have lower job fatality rates.

The combination of union protection and effective safety regulation has wide public support. The **ITUC's 2017 global poll** found that 75 per cent of people want unions "to play an active role in society." In the survey of almost 16,000 people on five continents, 'laws that protect health and safety' headed the list of valued labour laws, with a 96 per cent approval rating.

It shouldn't be a hard sell. Not only does a combination of better rights and better regulations save lives, it is also good for the economy. A **report to the US Congress** published in February 2018 estimated that for workplace health and safety, costs from regulations in 2015 were US\$0.5bn to US\$0.6bn, but these were dwarfed by the benefits, calculated at US\$1.2bn to US\$3.1bn.

The rising global death toll, though, shows that neither the human nor the economic message is being heeded. More needs to be done. That is why ITUC is reinvigorating its global health and safety campaign. The early priorities are to escalate the drive for a global ban on asbestos and to renew the **zero occupational cancers campaign**. Addressing the diseases of despair, including work-related suicide and mental illness, are high on the priority list.

Unions will also press the International Labour Organisation (ILO) for binding rules on manual handling and ergonomics. We will at the same time be seeking to defend and improve existing ILO standards. We also want to see occupational health and safety recognised as one of the **ILO's Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work**

alongside existing fundamental standards on forced labour, child labour, discrimination at work and freedom of association and rights to collectively bargain.

Health is a human right and it does not stop at the factory gate. Our strategy will use the full union toolbox – from representation, to negotiation, to action – to organise for decent, safe and healthy work.

## RESOURCES

[ITUC/Hazards 28 April 2018 campaign website](#) and theme announcement in [English](#), [Spanish](#) and [French](#).



Photo: Samer Muscati/HRW

### A deadly world of inequality

Why are work-related deaths increasing? Because the working world remains profoundly, deliberately and fatally unfair.

A March 2018 editorial in the [American Journal of Public Health](#) (AJPH) notes that industry suppresses evidence of health risks while introducing more oppressive work practices. It adds that of “central importance” in understanding work-related health inequities is recognising “the power inequity between corporations and working people. Many corporations influence health, and promote health inequity, through producing and marketing toxic substances and unhealthy products.

“To improve profitability, many implement stressful forms of work organisation, such as contracting out, just-in-time scheduling, nonstandard shifts, excessive overtime, or ‘lean production,’ which increase psychosocial stressors such as job strain and effort-reward imbalance, all of which affects workers’ health, and especially for women, the ability to balance work and care demands.”

The AJPH paper warns: “Efforts to document the adverse impact of work on health confront corporate efforts to ‘manufacture doubt’ about the science, limit funding, limit regulation, and restrict access to data.”

The health impact of industry decisions extends beyond the work you do, to the pay you get. **Reward work, not wealth**, a January 2018 report from Oxfam revealed 82 per cent of wealth generated in the preceding year across the world went to the **richest one per cent of the global population**, while the 3.7 billion people who make up the poorest half saw their wealth stagnate.

**World Employment and Social Outlook – Trends 2018**, a February 2018 analysis by the **International Labour Organisation** (ILO), estimated almost 1.4 billion workers were in vulnerable employment in 2017. It warned the number of people in “extreme working poverty is expected to exceed 114 million in 2018.”

This inequity is a major reason unions are so valued. In the **ITUC’s 2107 global poll**, ‘rising inequality’ topped the league table of global anxieties, followed by job losses and climate change.

“Why is increasing income inequality and **job insecurity** a health and safety issue?,” asks ITUC’s Sharan Burrow. “Because both go hand-in-hand with an inability to raise concerns about poor conditions or to refuse dirty, difficult and dangerous work.”

Research by **University of California Davis** academics, published in January 2018 in the **BE Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy**, confirmed that when wages go up, workplace sickness absence goes down. The study indicated better wages led to improved worker health, with more job satisfaction and better safety programmes coming as part of the better pay package.

**“Low pay more often than not comes in tandem with low health and safety standards**, so occupational injuries and diseases like **diabetes** and cancer frequently come with the job” says Burrow.

“Inequality doesn’t just hurt your income. It can kill you.”



## Case history: Unions can beat sexual harassment

Chicago hotel workers have celebrated a new ordinance they say will protect them from harassment, signed in the city in October 2017. Their union, Unite Here Local 1, said the '**Hands Off Pants On**' ordinance will from 1 July 2018 require all hotels in Chicago to equip employees with panic buttons if they work alone in guest rooms or bathrooms.

The hotels must also develop sexual harassment policies and are banned from retaliating against whistleblowers. Unions in **Seattle** and **New York** have negotiated contract clauses that require hotels to provide lone workers with panic buttons.

Unions are also fighting sexual harassment at the international level. An ITUC-led campaign is pressing for an International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention to tackle gender-based violence at work. In June 2018, the ILO Conference will discuss the development of international labour standards on violence against women and men at work.

The **ITUC** estimates more than one third of women around the world experience violence at work, at home or in the community. The global union confederation, which has produced an **action toolkit**, argues action in the workplace is crucial to tackling the issue across the board.

Gains are also being made at the industry level, affecting multinational companies' practices throughout their operations worldwide.

In 2017, the global food union federation IUF signed an international agreement with catering and services multinational Sodexo on measures to prevent sexual harassment at the workplace. The **IUF-Sodexo Joint Commitment**, which IUF says is based on a 'shared recognition' that sexual harassment is a human rights violation and that women working in the services are exposed to high levels of risk, sets out a policy and procedures for ensuring zero tolerance.

In 2016, global unions IndustriALL and IUF struck an agreement with **soups-to-soaps multinational Unilever** to help prevent sexual harassment in the workplace and make it easier for employees to report it.

PHOTO: HANDS OFF PANTS ON



## Case history: Challenging a global company on 28 April

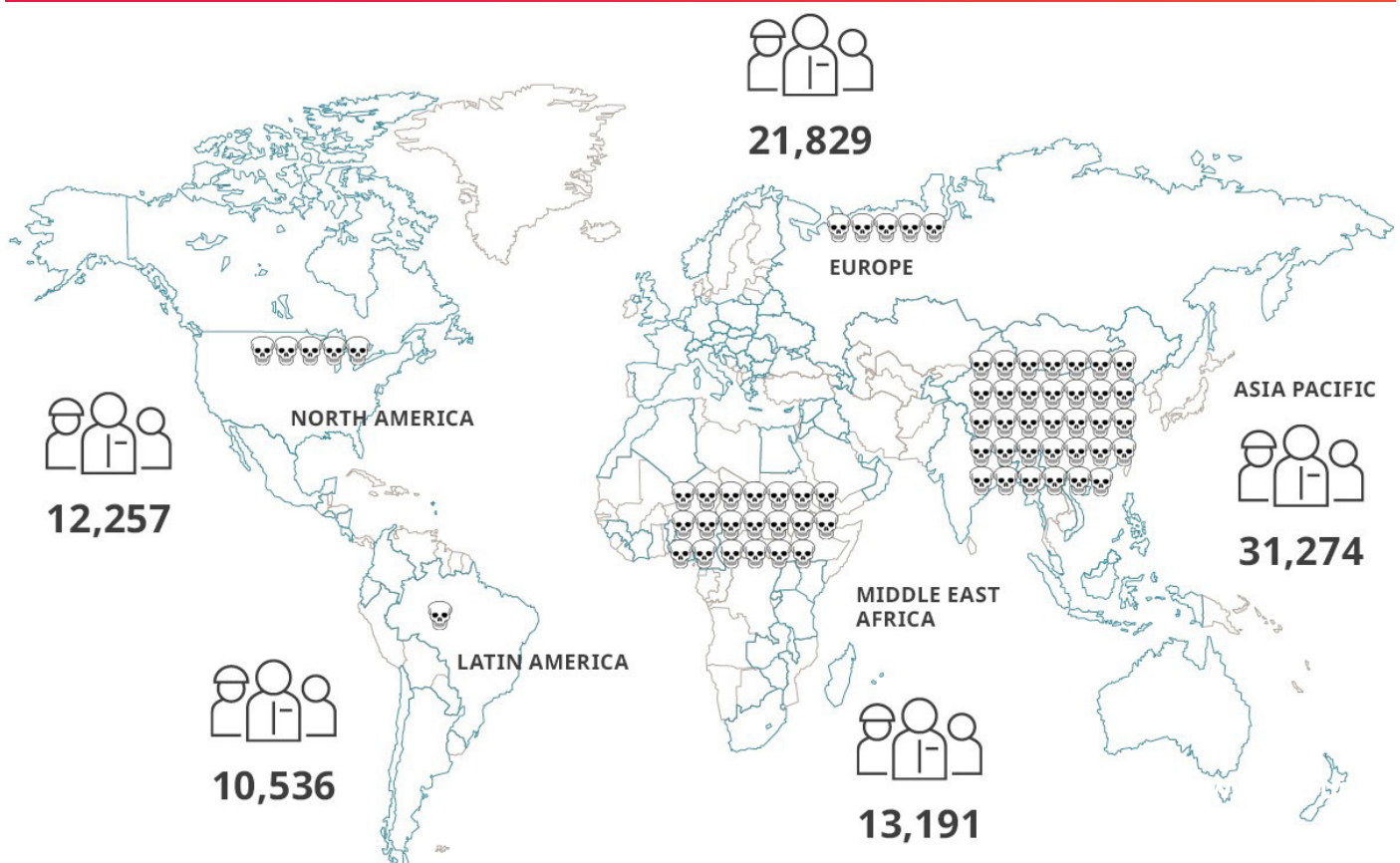
**Global building union BWI** is urging union members working for multinational building materials company LafargeHolcim (LH) to use 28 April 2018 to highlight the firm's deadly record and to call for improvements.

Calling for action on International Workers' Memorial Day, the global union said: "It is time to send a strong signal toward LH management in order to improve health and safety and respect workers' lives! We call upon you to take action on 28 April, the International commemoration day for dead and injured workers."

BWI said its demands include a call for it to keep a promise to "respect workers' lives." It wants the firm to work with unions to improve health and safety practices and to "involve workers and their trade unions in the health and safety dialogue". It adds there should be an end to "top-down approaches in health and safety."

Early in 2018, the company was on the brink of signing a global framework agreement with BWI, but then withdrew. When 74 union leaders from 40 countries with LafargeHolcim operations sent a letter to the company CEO, Jan Jenisch, demanding he honour his company's commitment to reach a global agreement, the company did not even respond.

BWI said a "breakdown in social dialogue is happening in front of an extremely poor health and safety record of the company. While 65 people were killed on the job at LafargeHolcim last year, not a single joint health and safety meeting on global level took place so far despite several prior announcements." The global union added: "Let us stand shoulder to shoulder to make change and save workers' lives in LafargeHolcim. And the very first condition is the establishment of a fair global social dialogue at all levels."



**65 people were killed on the job at LafargeHolcim in 2017**

Graphic: BWI





## Case history: Global unions win US\$2.3m Bangladesh safety payout

Trade unions representing Bangladeshi garment workers have reached a US\$2.3m (£1.6m) settlement with a multinational fashion brand accused of postponing the process of fixing life-threatening hazards in factories. The fashion brand, which cannot be named under the terms of the agreement, will pay \$2m to fix safety issues in more than 150 garment factories in Bangladesh and a further \$300,000 towards improving pay and conditions for workers in global clothing supply chains.

Global unions **UNI** and **IndustriALL** took two leading fashion brands to court in 2016 following the introduction of Bangladesh's Accord on Fire and Building Safety in 2013, a legally binding agreement under which the world's largest fashion brands must shoulder the costs for improving health and safety in Bangladeshi factories.

The Accord came into effect after the fatal Rana Plaza factory collapse killed an estimated 1,135 people in April 2013. The two global unions settled another case relating to factory conditions in Bangladesh at The Hague's Permanent Court of Arbitration in December 2017, with another unnamed global brand. Commenting on the latest deal, announced in January 2018, UNI's Christy Hoffman said: "The settlement makes real resources available to over 150 factories so they can finally make the necessary repairs that were needed years ago." She added: "We will continue pushing to make sure that all brands contribute their fair share to make work safer in Bangladesh."

IndustriALL's general secretary Valter Sanches said the settlement is "proof that legally-binding mechanisms can hold multinational companies to account". He added: "We are glad that the brand in question is now taking seriously its responsibility for the safety of its supplier factories in Bangladesh."



## Case history: When death seems preferable to work

A trail of worker suicides and deaths is blighting textile spinning mills in south India, the **global union IndustriALL** has said.

It reports that in the latest incident, on 6 February 2018, child labourer Dharshini Balasubramani's body was found in a hostel at Dollar Spinning Mills in Tamil Nadu. The 13-year-old had killed herself the day after working a 16-hour double shift. When the hostel warden knocked on her door at 6.15am to wake her for another shift, there was no reply. She was found hanging from the ceiling fan. The young orphan was recruited through an agent and brought to the mill three months earlier, where she was paid US\$4 per day.

According to IndustriALL: "They face harsh working conditions, poor health facilities and sexual harassment at work. With scant government oversight, managers flout the law and workers have no way to address grievances. Managers strongly resist unions and take advantage of the poverty of workers' families to close the issue by paying meagre compensation."

Apoorva Kaiwar, South Asia regional secretary of IndustriALL, said: "It is unacceptable that women workers in spinning mills face dangerous working conditions. It is alarming that many suspicious deaths are reported. The government should step in immediately to address the issue."

Police are investigating whether the factory broke both minimum working age and working hours regulations in employing the young teen in industrial work. The factory claims it thought she was older.

[www.hazards.org/suicide](http://www.hazards.org/suicide)



Photo: IndustriALL





## Case history: A low value on human life

Lan, a worker in a Vietnam factory supplying global fashion brands, sews 1,200 pairs of trainers a day for around \$1 [74p] an hour. “I work from 7am to 4pm each day. They make us reach our target and if we don’t make it, we have to do overtime,” she says.

Lan also works two extra jobs to make ends meet, as a tailor two evenings a week and serving at a restaurant on Sundays, her only day off from the factory. The amount she earns still isn’t enough to support her family - at the end of every month, after paying for essentials like rent and food, she has little money left over.

“There is pressure to meet the productivity target and work really hard, or else the manager will yell at you. The working conditions are uncomfortable. Because we are pushed hard, a lot of us have to work through lunch to ensure the target is met. There are no breaks. Another challenge is that I get scolded for using the restroom, and when I go there is someone taking notice of it. Because if you don’t meet the target, that’s how it is. I feel it’s not right. If someone needs to go to the restroom, they should be able to do that.”

The 32-year-old’s income supports two children and a husband who is mentally ill and unable to work. “We feel very tired but we still have to keep going otherwise we would get scolded and threatened to be fired from our jobs,” she says.

The development of independent trade unions - where workers are represented effectively - remains a challenge in many countries. Despite different industrial relations systems in for example, Vietnam and Bangladesh, respect for union representation and collective bargaining remains a priority for the global union movement. Garment workers in Bangladesh have seen a marked improvement in their working conditions, thanks to the union-brokered Bangladesh Accord.

In the five years since the Rana Plaza garment factory collapse outside Dhaka killed over 1,100 mostly female workers, local and global unions have been central to the development and operation of a programme that has seen over a million workers benefit directly, with the creation of hundreds of joint labour-management safety committees and extensive remediation work to hundreds of factories, paid for by global brands.



## Case history: US poultry workers win campaign against speed up

Poultry workers in the United States have won an important victory after campaigning against the industry's attempt to remove the maximum line speed. If the petition by the **National Chicken Council** to the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) had been successful it would have reversed an Obama administration decision to limit the number of birds processed to 140 per minute. The limit was designed to protect workers from strain injuries and other risks.

Marc Perrone, president of the **food union UFCW**, and Stuart Applebaum, president of its **retail affiliate RWDSU**, both praised union members who campaigned in support of the line speed limit. Union organisers went door-to-door, made phone calls, and spoke directly with fellow members at worksites, urging them to send postcards and messages to federal agencies.

Commenting on the 29 January 2018 **ruling by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA)**, Perrone said: "In addition to putting poultry workers at greater risk of injury, eliminating line speeds puts consumers at risk by making it more difficult for both federal inspectors and quality control workers to properly check birds for contamination. It was unbelievable to see major poultry industry groups ignore these well-known risks and lobby the USDA [US department of agriculture] to eliminate line speeds."

The fight now moves to the pork industry, following a USDA decision earlier in January 2018 to eliminate line speeds in pork processing. **UFCW president Perrone** said this was a decision "driven entirely by corporate greed and which defies common sense".

George Washington University lecturer Celeste Monforton said USDA's "calculations fail to include the cost of injuries to the pork-processing workers that will result from increased line speeds."



Photo: Alice Welch/USDA