

# Striving for a Just and Safer Workplace

Central Minnesota's Poultry Industry and its Disposable Workers

**GREATER MINNESOTA WORKER CENTER**

April 1, 2016

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## Central Minnesota's Poultry Industry and its Disposable Workers

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A 2016 Survey of Poultry workers in Central Minnesota reveals that packinghouse workers report significant injuries, unfair treatment, and religious discrimination.

Workers interviewed for the surveys tell us that the companies are more committed to meeting the rising demands from their consumers than the welfare of their workforce. Indeed, GNP's Cold Spring plant "pushes out 8 million pounds of chicken per week"<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, production workers apparently take the brunt of the pain in meeting the companies' strategic production goals. Workers' claims of increasing workload, which they say results in excruciating pain due to repetitive motion and musculoskeletal injuries, are corroborated by recent media reports, which confirm that local meat production companies are expanding processing facilities to meet steadily increasing consumer demand for chicken and turkey.

We learned from this research that workers reportedly are constantly faced with growing pressure and intimidation from line leads and supervisors to work like robots at crippling line speeds, which in turn sacrifices production employees' safe work behaviors and their ability to have a real voice on the job. These frontline managers evidently ensure strict enforcement of line run rules, verify item statistics and track production schedules.

The preliminary analysis of the survey of production line workers indicates that there seems to be substantial occurrence of health and safety violations, unfair treatment, religious discrimination, and unfair conflict management.

## **ABOUT THE REPORT:**

Last year, Greater Minnesota Worker Center conducted a brief survey to examine the conditions of workers in the Central Minnesota poultry processing plants. We interviewed 15 workers who process chicken and turkey in Central Minnesota for over a period of six months starting from July, and have learned about some of the workplace rights violations they have apparently experienced. This year, we set out to expand the research to look at the unique challenges poultry workers face and the frequency at which those problems occur. So, we interviewed 38 more workers and have learned a lot more about the abuses that workers evidently accept in order to provide for themselves and their families and to feed a nation's surging appetite for poultry. This preliminary report outlines those issues as related by workers to the GMWC during the survey.

The goal of this report is to present firsthand reliable, timely and relevant information about the work floor experiences of poultry workers in Central Minnesota and to inform our organizing efforts in the region. Policymakers can also use the findings and recommendations in this report to provide a solid basis to take appropriate action or to review their approach to law enforcement.

The Worker Center's Poultry Workers Organizing Committee has been instrumental in the identification and selection of a random and representative sample of workers at GNP and Jennie-o for interviews.

# IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

“A few years ago our demand exceeded our capability, and our available supply. Knowing that as we looked forward at our strategic planning, we looked at what consumers want and how do we provide the solution to what they want. We’ve had a list of customers that we just could not sell because we’ve got a very high demand.”<sup>2</sup>... Executive Vice President Tim Wensman confirms the survey finding that demand for chicken may be driving the increasing speed of lines at the plant floor.



“...So we’re not fully staffed. We would like to have more workers. We are currently trying different recruiting techniques to bring more workers in.”<sup>3</sup> Peggy Brown, Gold’n Plump Senior Director of Human Resources.

## **KEY FINDINGS Based on Worker Statements:**

- Poultry workers often suffer work-related injuries and pain
- Employers may discourage or intimidate workers from seeking medical care and deny accommodation after injuries
- Workers are often denied bathroom breaks
- Workers experience management's inability to address workplace conflict fairly
- Workers are denied prayer and Ramadan/fasting accommodation and as a result experience religious discrimination
- The extremely fast line speed may compromise both employee and food safety

## INTRODUCTION:

Consumers may walk into any store, deli or restaurant and buy quality chicken products in Minnesota and across the United States. In general, Americans consume about 89 pounds of chicken every year<sup>4</sup>. Contrastingly, as the Greater Minnesota Worker Center's Central Minnesota Poultry Worker Survey illustrates, the workers who feed us are reportedly paying the ultimate price with their health and safety and the industry is impacting negatively on workers and their families. Central Minnesota's poultry industry workers evidently do more with fewer workers per line at regularly increasing line speeds designed for machines, face constant intimidation and fear of job loss and unfair treatment including religious discrimination.

This report summarizes the experiences of 38 production workers at GNP's Cold Spring Plant and to a lesser extent Jennie-O turkey store in Melrose who responded to 14 survey questions in person over a period of three months. It shows that workers reportedly experience unfair treatment and discrimination, significant injuries and pain occasioned by inadequate staffing, excessive line speed, repetitive motion injuries, forceful exertions and sustained positions. Workers tell us that they are being asked to do more as staff turnover is high because their colleagues quit out of frustration, pain or pressure by the line leads and supervisors. These troubling experiences take a toll on workers and their families and by extension consumers as workers' health might have been affected by workplace conditions which in turn affects food safety. The following pages present survey participants' workplace experiences as part of a brief outline of the findings of this preliminary report and the appropriate recommendations based on the report.

## **SURVEY PARTICIPANTS' WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES:**

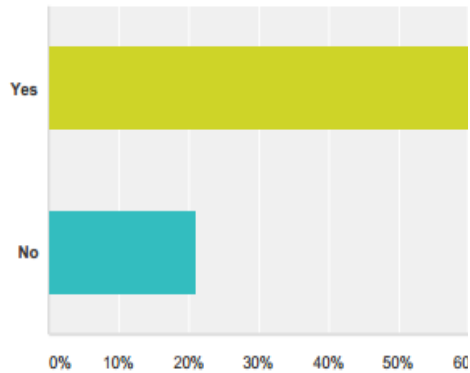
### **1. WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY CONCERNS:**

Employers have a responsibility to ensure workplace health and safety for all employees regardless of their job category or legal status. It is the law and it's the right the right thing to do. Interestingly though poultry workers in central Minnesota's premier packinghouses have expressed a serious concern about personal safety at work, almost 80 per cent of workers interviewed have stated that they worry about their safety at work. These concerns may be related to accidents, strains or even injuries and the underlying factors that contribute to these trepidations.



## Q2 Do you have any concerns a safety at work?

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0



| Answer Choices | Respon |
|----------------|--------|
| Yes            | 78.95% |
| No             | 21.05% |
| Total          |        |

81 % of respondents expressed safety concerns stemming from multiple preventable factors

### CAUSES OF SAFETY CONCERNS:

When we pressed workers further and asked them about

what causes their safety concerns, 43 per cent responded that they worry about pain or injuries.

Workers expressed equal concerns (13.51 % each) about the dangers of chemical spill and wet, freezing or slippery floors as other major causes of safety concerns. Overall, 81 % of Survey respondents expressed occupational health and safety concerns emanating either from chemical spill, injuries or pain, dangerous machines, line speed or wet, freezing, and slippery floors.

Workers tell us that the plant management is either implicit in the hazards workers face or do not fully understand the depth of danger workers have to accept every working day including the risk

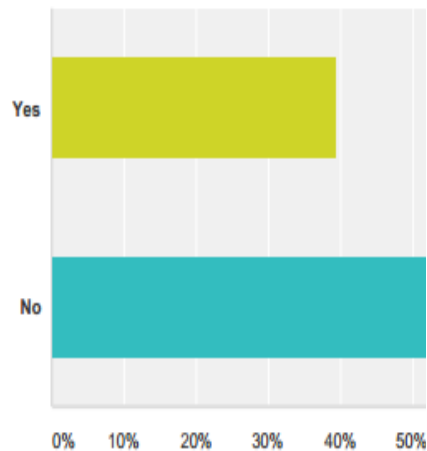
of injury from chemical hazards, extreme line speeds, machinery and work overload. Some workers say that they either had to quit out of frustration or keep silent since their repeated calls to correct a workplace hazard often fell on deaf ears.

### **WORK-RELATED INJURIES:**

Some of the workers interviewed have asserted that they suffer injury or disability from workplace incidents. Occupational injuries including carpal tunnel and musculoskeletal injuries are some of the most important issues workers mentioned as the major cause of disabling pain and illness. Some of the workers have shown us visible injuries on their hands, eyes, and skin. Others have described to us the agonizing pain they feel on parts of their body including spine, neck, head, wrists, shoulders and legs. Overall, four in every ten workers interviewed stated they have experienced job-related injuries.

### Q1 Have you ever been in workplace?

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0



4 in every 10 workers have experienced work-related injury

| Answer Choices |
|----------------|
| Yes            |
| No             |
| Total          |

In fact, while workers have a right to hazardous exposure records and medical records under the OSHA law, it is fair to conclude that, based on the interview responses, these injuries are undercounted and underreported for a number of reasons. One, workers have informed us that their employers do not refer them to independent medical clinics in the event work-related injury occurs. If at all, the workers get an opportunity to receive medical care beyond the plant premises it is usually done by a facility that the employer has established business relations with and the workers believe that they cannot trust the opinion of such an establishment as objective because of the evident vested mutual business interests between the employer and the clinic or the provider.

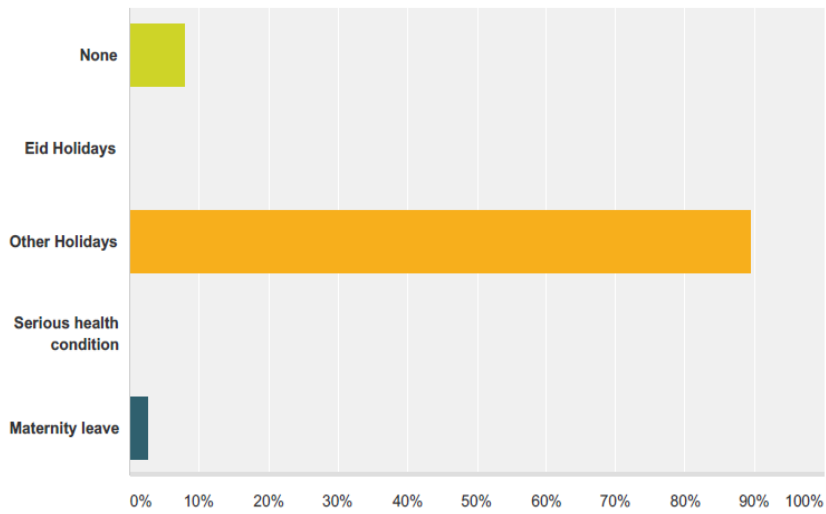
Two, workers tell us that the poultry companies do not like to adequately document injuries because they don't want to admit liability for worker injuries and illness. Third, workers tell us they are assigned (disciplinary) points for each day they miss work, come late or call in sick even if they do so in order to see a doctor for workplace injuries or illness. This may discourage workers who are earning low wages from missing work as they cannot afford to lose a day's pay. Fourth, workers tell us that some injured workers sometimes do not report such injuries due to fear of job loss.

As a result, workers told us that the packing companies often blame workers as either causing the injuries on themselves or having sustained such injuries outside of the plant. In either case, it apparently leads to underreporting of injuries and illnesses. This means that workers may not get adequate diagnosis, treatment, or job accommodation.

Another remarkable response we got is that none of the workers interviewed mentioned that they get paid time off for serious health conditions. If anything, this underscores the need for legislation to protect workers who have to miss work for serious health conditions and to provide paid sick leave for the duration they may be away from work.

### Q10 Do you get paid time off for?

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0



| Answer Choices           | Responses |
|--------------------------|-----------|
| None                     | 7.89% 3   |
| Eid Holidays             | 0.00% 0   |
| Other Holidays           | 89.47% 34 |
| Serious health condition | 0.00% 0   |
| Maternity leave          | 2.63% 1   |
| <b>Total</b>             | <b>38</b> |

### LINE SPEED:

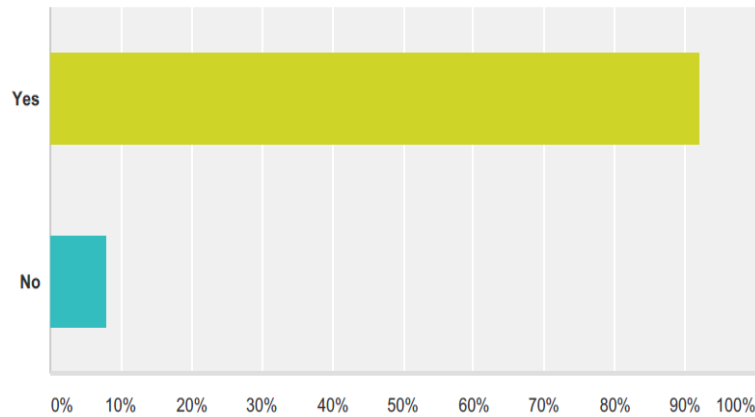
The drive for maximum productivity in Central Minnesota’s packing plants may be costing workers their wellbeing. Workers interviewed have described the production line speed as

extreme, heartbreaking and immeasurable. One former GNP worker who has interviewed for this survey declared that “the speed of the machine is so fast that I sometimes became dizzy and lightheaded” Anab Mohamed<sup>5</sup>. Another worker has characterized the motion of the chicken thighs she worked on as moving like flowing water while others have used words like raging river in reference to the speed of the production line.

Recent research on poultry processing in other parts of the United States indicates that “work speed was identified as the central hazard.”<sup>6</sup>

#### Q4 Is the speed of line ever too fast?

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0



| Answer Choices | Responses |
|----------------|-----------|
| Yes            | 92.11% 35 |
| No             | 7.89% 3   |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>38</b> |

While different departments within the same plant may, to some extent, have varying levels of line speeds but the critical operation of the line to meet the planned higher output per hour and lower than optimum staffing levels reportedly exposes workers to increased risk of occupational

health and safety which negatively affects their prospect to maintain long term employment relationship at the plant. All in all, 92 per cent of the respondents to this survey confirmed that the line speed is too fast.



92 %

OF RESPONDENTS SAY  
THE  
LINE SPEED IS TOO FAST

## 2. UNFAIR TREATMENT:

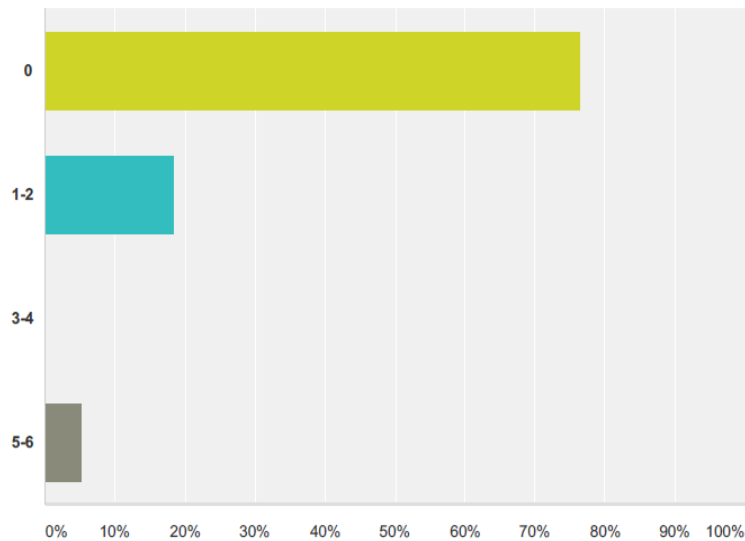
### RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION:

#### I. Prayer and Ramadan

The overwhelming majority (76 %) of workers interviewed have reported that they experience, on daily basis, the lack of religious accommodation particularly as relates to the Muslim daily prayers.

#### Q7 How many prayer breaks do you get in a week?

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0



| Answer Choices | Responses |           |
|----------------|-----------|-----------|
| 0              | 76.32%    | 29        |
| 1-2            | 18.42%    | 7         |
| 3-4            | 0.00%     | 0         |
| 5-6            | 5.26%     | 2         |
| <b>Total</b>   |           | <b>38</b> |



This survey finding is consistent with the conclusions of a settlement reached between Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and GNP in 2008, where 11 workers charged that they had been denied prayer accommodations during the 5-6 day working week with shifts oftentimes ranging from 8.5 hours to at times about 10 hours. The Muslim daily prayers' times shift slightly every week and by more than one hour at every daylight savings time. Surveyed workers tell us that GNP production schedule does not accommodate this change, unless their regular breaks closely coincide with prayer times accidentally. It would appear from workers' survey responses that GNP no longer complies with the reasonable accommodation they agreed to in 2008, which binds the company to provide ten-minute prayer breaks outside of the regular breaks which are mandated by appropriate laws and to do so with the flexibility Muslim workers require. The appropriate text of the section relating to prayer accommodation has been included here below:

**EEOC V. GNP Settlement in 2008 as pertains to religious discrimination<sup>7</sup>:**

**V. INJUNCTION AGAINST BARS OR RESTRICTIONS ON THE PROVISION OF REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION**

Gold'n Plump shall not discriminate on the basis of religion in violation of Title VII and shall reasonably accommodate the religious practices of Charging Parties and other Muslim employees with respect to daily Muslim prayers at its Arcadia, Wisconsin and Cold Spring, Minnesota processing facilities on each shift as follows: **In addition to receiving other breaks and lunch breaks as otherwise required by law, such employees in second processing shall be afforded a ten minute break in the second one-half of the shift which break shall be scheduled so as to accommodate the daily Muslim schedule for prayer.** Employees in first processing shall be permitted to transfer to secondary processing in order to accommodate their practices with respect to daily prayers.

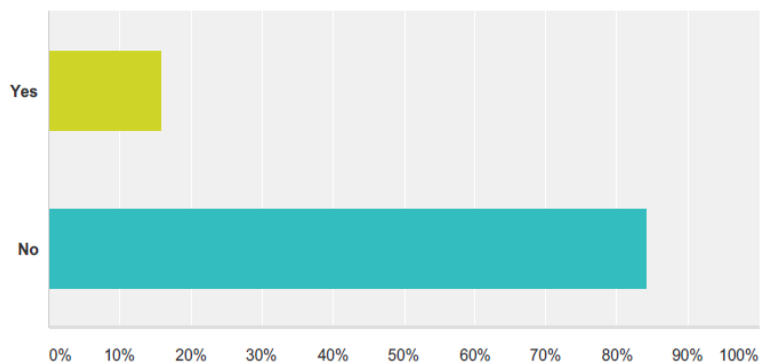
Workers also tell us that their regular breaks most often do not coincide with the times they need to break their fast in the evening or to eat predawn meal before starting to fast again. In addition workers say that they have been unsuccessful in their effort to secure concessions as relates to appropriate accommodations. As a result, workers who have been fasting for 16 hours a day have apparently had to delay their fast-breaking meal longer and as a result have had to work hungrier.

### WORKPLACE CONFLICT:

Conflict is a possible outcome in any workplace, and managers have the responsibility to address conflict in a healthy way. 84 per cent of workers interviewed believe that the GNP management at the Cold Spring Plant does not address issues and conflict fairly.

#### Q11 Does management fairly address issues/conflict at work?

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0



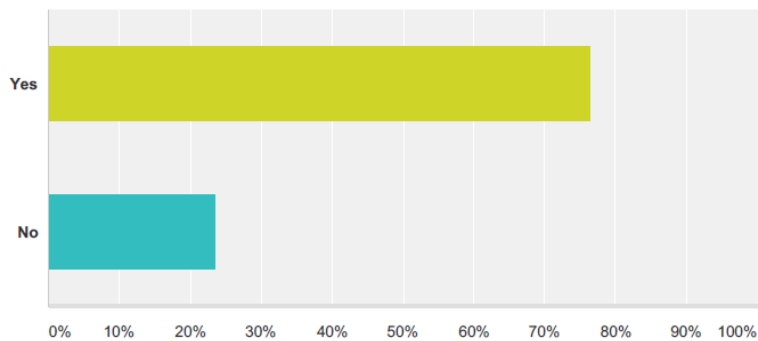
| Answer Choices | Responses |           |
|----------------|-----------|-----------|
| Yes            | 15.79%    | 6         |
| No             | 84.21%    | 32        |
| <b>Total</b>   |           | <b>38</b> |

Indeed, workers have made two broad claims to the survey collector: 1) GNP fires all production workers who engage in a fight, brawl or quarrel at work regardless of whether one was right and the other an aggressor; 2) the Human Resources Department always sides with the line lead or the supervisor in the event of a conflict with a production worker even when there is clear evidence that the frontline management was in the wrong. As a result, production workers have expressed a strong opinion about GNP’s ability to fairly resolve workplace conflict.

When asked if production workers have ever faced disrespectful or discriminatory treatment, 76 per cent of workers have responded in the affirmative. This corroborates workers’ claims that workplace conflict resolutions are not fair.

**Q13 Have you ever faced disrespectful, belittling or discriminatory treatment from the lead, supervisor or HR?**

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0



| Answer Choices | Responses |
|----------------|-----------|
| Yes            | 76.32% 29 |
| No             | 23.68% 9  |
| Total          | 38        |

## **INADEQUATE STAFFING LEVELS:**

Ensuring appropriate production staffing is crucial to worker well-being and consumer safety.

Inadequate staffing levels places the demands of the extra workload which involves substantial stress and burden on production workers. This is likely to increase the rate of injuries and errors and could as well affect both the quality and safety of food.

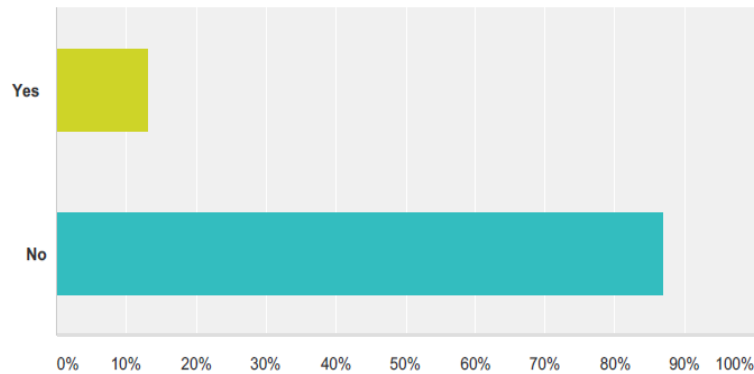
Evidently, despite tremendous mechanization at the poultry packinghouses in Central Minnesota, the human element is still critical to operating the lines and helping the production companies achieve their bottom lines. However, workers interviewed paint a different picture of the treatment they receive. Many current workers state that their colleagues quit out of frustration with management, hazardous work conditions or lack of accommodation for protected religious needs, or worse they are fired for work-related injuries they sustain. They describe the work environment as an exploitative place where they are seen as disposable and a short term solution. As a result, the turnover is nearly constant. Workers who produce the chicken and turkey we buy at local stores and delis describe an industry that sees its production workers as short term rather long term partners whose contribution to company growth and profit margins is not apparently appreciated.

Worse even, inadequate staffing systems seemingly force those who show up to pick up the tab of those who quit or are injured. Workers reported to us that in March 2016 alone, a couple of dozen workers quit GNP because a local unionized manufacturing plant hired them away. Those who left to start at the new plant are very quick to contrast the two work environments, describing their former employer as abusive to say the least. Those who stayed behind tell us that

not only did they have to pick more workload but they also had to return for mandatory overtime Saturday shift.

### Q12 Do you feel your job has adequate staffing levels?

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0



| Answer Choices | Responses | Count     |
|----------------|-----------|-----------|
| Yes            | 13.16%    | 5         |
| No             | 86.84%    | 33        |
| <b>Total</b>   |           | <b>38</b> |

Generally, over 86 per cent of workers interviewed say that their job does not have adequate staffing levels. Workers assert that inadequate staffing levels coupled with high line speeds exposes them to substantial workplace health and safety hazards and stressful job situations which compromise both quality of production and their overall health and wellbeing.

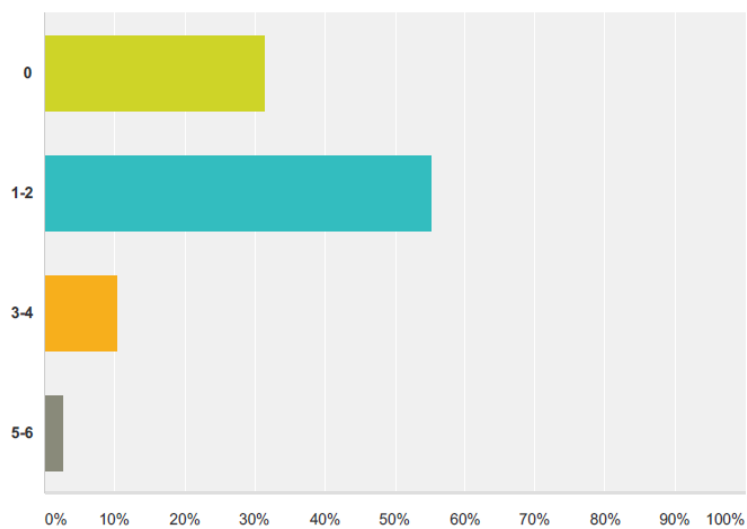
Workers say that the ideal solution for high worker turnover is to treat production workers as human beings, not as machines, connect them to medical care when injured, reduce the speed of line and provide fair and humane treatment and appropriate religious and work accommodations.

## BATHROOM BREAKS:

While access to bathroom breaks is a right protected under OSHA regulations, 86 per cent of workers interviewed told the survey collectors that they get less than two bathroom breaks in a week.

### Q6 How many bathroom breaks do you get in a week:

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0



| Answer Choices | Responses |
|----------------|-----------|
| 0              | 31.58% 12 |
| 1-2            | 55.26% 21 |
| 3-4            | 10.53% 4  |
| 5-6            | 2.63% 1   |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>38</b> |

Some workers have expressed concern over adverse health effects for ongoing restrictions on bathroom breaks on the work floor.

# IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

## POULTRY WORKERS SPEAK OUT

“I have been asked to sign a warning letter nine times in 2 years just for asking to use the bathroom. I felt oppressed” Mohamed Mohamed

“The speed of the machine is so fast that I sometimes become dizzy and lightheaded” Anab Mohamed<sup>\*5</sup>

“I had a chemical spill on my eyes. I went to the nurse who washed my face and eyes and sent me home. She asked me to come back the following day. I did. I went to the nurse the following day. My eyes were red and my face swollen. When I asked for medical referral, she told me that I had the problems with my eyes and face from somewhere else even though she was the one who attended to me the day before” Abdiaziz

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Form health and safety joint labor/management committee where employees choose their own representative and have a real voice to help set and implement safety goals to prevent work-related injuries and illnesses. Address inadequate staffing levels to minimize unsafe workloads
- Clearly stated company bathroom policies which must be accessible to employees upon request and
- Enforcement of reasonable access to bathroom use and address underlying circumstances which lead to unwarranted restrictions on restroom use.
- Adequate and ongoing health and safety education and hazard prevention
- Strict enforcement of OSHA regulations, Title VII and other human rights laws
- Afford Muslim workers a flexible accommodation for the daily schedule for prayers



## **CONCLUSION:**

The examination of this survey results demonstrates that poultry processing workers in Central Minnesota face multiple dangers. The primary challenges outlined in this report including health and safety, unfair treatment and restrictions on the use of the bathrooms may affect not just the workers themselves but the consumers and the communities in which these workers live and work. The failure to address the substantial claims workers have made including religious discrimination, extreme line speeds, unsafe work floors, inadequate staffing levels and unfair conflict management may be the greatest setback for the companies own long term staffing sustainability and strategic goals as well.

The poultry processing plants in central Minnesota must urgently address the human cost of producing poultry products without disposing workers.

Another important aspect that may be missing is the need for strict enforcement of the laws on the books. State and Federal agencies such as Minnesota Department of Human Rights, Minnesota OSHA and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission must be adequately funded so that they will be able to respond to the claims that workers are making to alleviate human suffering and to maintain a safer food supply for consumers.

## ENDNOTES:

1. St. Cloud Times Report- GNP expansion nears completion:  
<http://www.sctimes.com/story/money/2016/04/19/gnp-expansion-nears-completion/82936762/>
2. GNP Company Expanding, Struggling For Workers [VIDEO] | <http://wjon.com/gnp-company-expanding-struggling-for-workers/?trackback=tsmclip>. 4/19/2016
3. Read More: GNP Company Expanding, Struggling For Workers [VIDEO] | <http://wjon.com/gnp-company-expanding-struggling-for-workers/?trackback=tsmclip>”  
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4. Lives on the Line: The Human Cost of Cheap Chicken-Released by Oxfam America:  
[http://www.oxfamamerica.org/static/media/files/Lives\\_on\\_the\\_Line\\_Full\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](http://www.oxfamamerica.org/static/media/files/Lives_on_the_Line_Full_Report_Final.pdf)
5. \* Anab Mohamed. Last name changed to protect identity
6. SPLC: Unsafe at These Speeds: <http://www.schoolfoodfocus.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/SOUTHERN-POVERTY-LAW-CENTER-Unsafe-at-These-Speeds-presentation-for-School-Food-Focus.pdf>
7. EEOC V. GNP Settlement in 2008 as pertains to religious discrimination:  
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