

Union Organizers at Poultry Plants in South Find Newly Sympathetic Ears

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Body

Hour after hour, Antonia Lopez Paz said, her supervisor at the Koch Foods poultry plant here told women on the deboning line that production demands were so great that they could not go to the bathroom.

Sometimes she developed acute pain because she could not go, Ms. Lopez said. And one time when another woman asked for permission, "the supervisor took off his hard hat and told her, 'You can go to the bathroom in this,'" said Ms. Lopez, a Mexican immigrant who moved to this town in East Tennessee three years ago, lured by the company's promise of year-round work.

Out of her solitary complaint has grown a thriving unionization drive that fits neatly into the plans of several insurgent unions that hope to revive the labor movement by focusing on low-wage workers and immigrant workers.

"We believe there is a need for a union to come in and help these workers," said Joe Hansen, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers, which is organizing workers at the two Koch Foods plants here. "The conditions in some of these places are criminal, especially in the way they treat undocumented workers, and it's criminal that they often get away with it."

This summer Mr. Hansen's union joined the Teamsters and the Service Employees International Union in breaking away from the A.F.L.-C.I.O., with those three unions promising to devote far more energy to recruiting workers than the rest of organized labor has. Two organizing drives aimed at poultry workers -- one in this old factory town and the other in Russellville, Ala. -- are among the early battles in this effort to reinvigorate labor.

As part of their new push, the insurgent unions say they will seek to build deep community support among local houses of worship, political leaders and immigrant groups. They also plan to lend organizers to one other's drives, something the food and commercial workers could use because it has few Spanish-speaking organizers in areas like Morristown, where the Hispanic population is soaring.

The 700 poultry workers here, most of them Mexicans, might seem ripe for organizing, but labor's efforts at resurgence face daunting obstacles. Companies often fight back tooth and nail, and many immigrants who are initially sympathetic to unions ultimately shy away, fearing that their employers might grow angry and fire them or have them deported.

"It's been extraordinarily difficult to organize factory workers -- and that includes poultry workers -- in the South," said Daniel Cornfield, a labor expert at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. "There's plenty of employer resistance in this neck of the woods. And then there's another problem -- there's an unfamiliarity between unions and immigrants, far more so in the South than on the coasts. Unions here don't know much about the culture of immigrant workers, and then many immigrant workers are unfamiliar with U.S. labor unions."

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But Ms. Lopez was the exception, knowing a good deal about American unions. The daughter of a migrant worker, she saw how the United Farm Workers helped her father when he harvested vegetables in Arizona.

Last April she quit Koch Foods because she was pregnant and the managers rejected her request to be transferred to a less rigorous position. Her job as a wing cutter was so arduous that she feared it would jeopardize her pregnancy.

Like many other workers, she disliked the 42-chickens-a-minute line speed. That pace means that many workers make 18,000 cuts during their eight-hour shifts as they prepare breasts, wings, tenders and cutlets for restaurants and consumers.

"What I didn't like is they would yell at us and tell us we're good for nothing and we didn't know how to work, and sometimes they wouldn't even let us leave to go home when we were sick," Ms. Lopez said as she nursed her month-old son. "We need to convince people to join the union, that they shouldn't be afraid because the union is the only way to make things better and stop them from mistreating at us."

Officials with Koch Foods declined requests to be interviewed. But at proceedings that the Tennessee Occupational Safety and Health Administration held in response to Ms. Lopez's bathroom complaint, Koch representatives said their supervisors were attentive to workers' concerns and gave adequate bathroom breaks.

Several Koch workers said the bathroom break situation improved after the unionization drive began, although some workers said problems remained. In August the state's safety administration dismissed their complaints for lack of evidence.

After Ms. Lopez quit, the unionization drive continued to gain momentum, fueled by the complaints about mistreatment and low wages. The top pay is \$7.55 an hour, even for employees there a decade.

"That level of pay is a misery, an embarrassment, considering how hard we work," said Ernestina Gonzalez, who earns the top wage and said she could not afford the premiums for the health insurance the company offers.

In northwest Alabama, 280 miles to the west, workers at the Gold Kist plant in Russellville voice similar complaints about line speed, wages and bathroom breaks. But many Gold Kist employees also complain about how injuries are handled. Most of the plant's 1,500 workers are Hispanic, but there are also many blacks and whites.

One day last December, Delores Smith slipped on a greasy metal plate. Ms. Smith, who prepares boxes to hold processed chickens, crashed to the floor and was in agony, certain that she had broken her right ankle.

She said Gold Kist's nurse did not even look at her ankle and told her that she must have sprained some ligaments and should take ibuprofen and go home. After a supervisor took her to her car, Ms. Smith looked at her ankle and saw pieces of bone protruding through her sock. When her son took her to the emergency room, X-rays showed that her ankle was broken in three places.

Ms. Smith still limps slightly, but now she has another health crisis. Her job involves removing folded-up boxes that workers upstairs send to her via a chute. Those boxes often tumble out, and one day in July the boxes knocked her eyeglasses to the floor, breaking the frames.

Looking comical in her taped-together glasses, Ms. Smith said: "They sent me home for the day, saying it was my fault. I also got a write-up. My glasses can't even be fixed."

At first, Gold Kist refused to pay for new glasses, which she said would cost \$378. With her base wage of \$8.40 an hour, that would exceed her weekly pay. Workers who do not arrive late or miss a day for a whole week receive a 75-cent-an-hour bonus.

The company, she said, has now offered to pay \$38 toward the glasses. She hopes to get some more from workers' compensation.

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Ms. Smith said she and the two other workers in her unit often could not go to the bathroom for hours at a time because the pace was so demanding and there was nobody to replace them.

"They don't respect us at all," she said. "That's why I'm praying for a union."

Yurken Pozo, who quit in early August, said Gold Kist was campaigning hard against unionization.

"They gathered the workers together and kept telling us: 'We don't need a union. The union will only take your money. The union doesn't help anybody,'" Mr. Pozo said.

Wayne Lord, Gold Kist's vice president for corporate relations, said the company's policy was to provide workers with needed bathroom breaks. He voiced surprise about Ms. Smith's health care complaints, saying Gold Kist had a telephone line that employees could call anonymously to report problems about bathroom breaks or medical treatment.

Gold Kist has long told employees why it thinks unions are unnecessary, Mr. Lord said. That practice helped persuade the Russellville workers to vote down a union twice in the 1990's.

"We believe our wages are competitive," Mr. Lord said. "We strive everyday to do the right thing by our employees."

The union is collecting signatures from workers and may soon ask for recognition from the company or for a unionization vote.

Back in Morristown, the Koch poultry workers are so united behind a union and have generated so much community support that they persuaded Koch to pledge not to mount an anti-union campaign. Several workers spoke at churches, and ministers, congregants and community groups wrote letters to the company backing unionization. The workers at Koch's kill plant and deboning plant are expected to approve unionization in mid-September.

"What Koch did is an important precedent," said Anita Grabowski, coordinator of the Poultry Workers Justice Project, a nonprofit group based in Austin, Tex. "This new model of community unionism is a way to help rebuild the labor movement, even in a hostile climate."

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Graphic

Photos: Yurken Pozo, who quit working for Gold Kist poultry last month, said the company told workers: "We don't need a union. The union will only take your money. The union doesn't help anybody." (Photo by Amy E. Voigt for The New York Times)

A complaint by Antonia Lopez Paz, a former worker at the Koch Foods poultry plant in Morristown, Tenn., helped prompt a unionization drive. (Photo by Wade Payne/Associated Press, for The New York Times)

Delores Smith, who makes \$8.40 an hour, broke her glasses on the job. She said her employer, Gold Kist, offered \$38 toward buying new ones. (Photo by Amy E. Voigt for The New York Times)

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