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Review of *Cutting into the Meatpacking Line: Workers and Change in the Rural Midwest* by Deborah Fink

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Cutting into the Meatpacking Line: Workers and Change in the Rural Midwest. Deborah Fink. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xv+235 pp. Notes, index. \$49.95 cloth (ISBN 0-8-78-2388-0), \$18.95 paper (ISBN 0-8078-4695-3).

This self-proclaimed anthropological and historical study about Midwest wage earners confronts many contemporary issues about the workplace in its 201 pages of text and photographs. Globalization, plant closings,

deregulation, immigrant workers, repetitive motion disorders, sexual harassment, and employee drug testing are just some of the topics covered. The author gathered first-hand data during five months of employment at a large pork processing plant outside Des Moines, Iowa; she augmented her observations with extant information on Iowa's rural economy for the twentieth century, especially tabulations from the US Census and reports from local newspapers.

The book's main interest is the effect of industrial restructuring on the well-being of waged workers who cut and package Iowa's pork, beef, and poultry production. For the author, the word "restructuring" is clearly a euphemism for what she sees as a process that has degraded the American workplace since the early 1980s. Foremost, it denotes the downsizing of plant operations associated with the elimination of high wage jobs, the constriction of employee rights and benefits, plus the loss of opportunity for stable, long-term employment among the working class. The economic high point for waged workers appears to be the 1960s and 1970s, when Oscar Mayer was the area's main employer; and the emergence of "new breed" packers after Oscar Mayer's closing in 1989 seems to mark the onset of a significant decline in their employment conditions.

The author links industrial restructuring to the continuation, instead of the abatement, of unfair discriminatory practices. At the top of this list is gender bias in job assignment and the presence of explicit wage differentials likewise based on gender. Between 1910 and 1990, women grew from just over one-eighth of the rural Iowa work force to over one-fourth of that population. Inequitable practices against women appear to have been a constant throughout that period. Of special interest is the fact that for some time there has been a general consensus among management and employees from every rank that a select number of cutting jobs have physical strength requirements very few women can meet. But despite that mutual understanding and federal legislation, it looks as though there have never been any company policies that have effectively dispersed women to most other meatpacking jobs. The author also cites the presence of a tacit wage differential based on race and suggests that non-white workers, especially Latinos and Southeast Asians, are now the fastest growing segment of meatpacking workers. She reports, with a hint of sadness, that many veteran male workers are unaware of the true causal relationship between the increasing presence of women and minority workers and the drop in magnitude of the overall wage structure in processing plants. Naturally, they view the newcomers as the chief reason why meatpackers barely earn a living wage.

There is irony in the author's reference to Thomas Jefferson's notion that independent farmers and stockmen represent the ideal pool of a democratic citizenry. Neither employers nor employees, Jefferson believed they were untainted or affected by the contradictions that accompany the presence of wage laborers. That Jeffersonian view serves as both a mythic and a moral benchmark because of the stereotype of most of the state's population being composed of rural homesteaders who have maintained wholesome beliefs and values; in other words, holding opinions and convictions unpolluted by the corruption associated with urban centers like Chicago. The author repeatedly reminds her readers that Iowa has a long history of wage earners in both rural and non-rural settings; and the powers that be in Iowa have for a long time successfully thwarted attempts to upgrade significantly the employment conditions of blue-collar workers.

The book is rich in topics, but primary data are often sparse. For example, the author relies on just one Asian informant and two Latino informants to describe the views of immigrant workers. She observes from afar younger female workers with overtly feminist views about work, but appears to have been unsuccessful at recruiting any of them fully to divulge their perspectives, which she says differ from those of older women. At one point in her short tenure as a meatpacking worker, the author volunteered to get a statistical analyst to examine employment and wage records for the plant's shop steward if he could acquire the raw data from management. The union official never asked for the available figures, and there was no follow up. I think an extra effort in data collection here and elsewhere was warranted. **Philip Garcia**, *Institute for Latino Studies, University of Notre Dame*.