

Agriculture by Suzanne Rose

Maquiladoras in the United States

The multinationals of the meatpacking industry are bringing the brutal conditions of the Mexican border plants back home.

On Oct. 15, a tuberculosis outbreak was reported at the Monfort pork packing plant in Marshalltown, Iowa, owned by the multinational company ConAgra. This outbreak is evidence that the labor practices of the food conglomerates are already leading to the unsafe and unsanitary conditions which have caused cholera to erupt in the *maquiladora* cheap-labor assembly plants and surrounding towns on the U.S.-Mexican border.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), scheduled to be voted upon by Congress next summer, will allow these companies to move to Mexico and intensify their austerity practices against the living standards of the people of both North and South America.

Fifty workers were reported infected with tuberculosis at the Marshalltown Monfort plant. When the plant was purchased by ConAgra in 1989, from Swift Packing, the work force was immediately subjected to union busting, so that wages could be lowered and worker health and safety regulations weakened, in this very dangerous and labor-intensive work.

On Sept. 22, an Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) raid on the Monfort meatpacking plant in Grand Island, Nebraska, uncovered the fact that up to 500 of the plant's 2,000-man work force were Mexicans working in the U.S. illegally. The *Minneapolis Star Tribune* on Oct. 2 exposed similar conditions in a Madelia, Minnesota chicken-processing plant, Tony Downs. This plant, one of the top 60 chicken-processing

plants in the country, was discovered to be recruiting its workers from the Texas-Mexico border and shipping them north to work at wages below the Minnesota minimum wage.

It is estimated by the *Tribune* that, like the Monfort plant in Grand Island, at least one-quarter of the Tony Downs workers are in the country illegally. Mexicans who come to work at the plant are packed into squalid housing either in company-owned mobile homes or dilapidated motels. Tony Downs is one of the primary packers of chicken products for the U.S. military and the Department of Agriculture.

Over the last five years, meat- and pork-packing plants owned by food monopolies like IBP, Cargill, and ConAgra have been filling up with workers recruited from Mexico, so that they can exploit them, in terms of wages, working, and living conditions. This is done under the dogma of free trade, and in the name of keeping a "competitive" work force. ConAgra, however, boasts a 20% return on investment!

It is only a matter of time before diseases like cholera which have accompanied the spread of free trade policies in South America, break out in the United States. On June 13, the first case of cholera was reported in Matamoros, a *maquiladora* town across the border from Brownsville, Texas.

The *maquiladoras* have become synonymous with the NAFTA agreement. The plants have relocated into Mexico for the explicit purpose of avoiding the U.S. taxes which help

support infrastructure costs, and of lowering labor costs.

By August, 151 cases of cholera were reported in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, where Matamoros is located. In Ciudad Juárez, across from El Paso, the first case of cholera appeared in June. The city is considered a high risk by officials, because of lack of sanitation facilities. Cholera, like tuberculosis, is a classic disease of poverty. Both diseases can be eliminated through basic economic infrastructure and public health measures.

Since 1975, wages in U.S. meatpacking plants have been halved. At one time the wages were higher than for manufacturing workers, because of the danger of the work. Companies have moved out of the big meatpacking centers in Chicago, Des Moines, and Omaha, into rural areas, where they have been able to break the unions and import cheap labor. The pressure on each worker is so intense that there is an 87% yearly turnover at the Grand Island plant. At the Madelia plant, the work pace is so fast—each worker must debone 5,700 chickens every eight hours—that most drop out after six months.

In their moves to the countryside, the major packers, who were swallowing up the independent packers and processors along the way, blackmailed state governments into reducing or eliminating their corporate income and property taxes, with the threat of locating somewhere else. ConAgra has waged an intense and nearly successful effort to eliminate government inspections of meat packing plants, having the company provide its own inspections. Monfort plants are regularly cited for government safety violations, particularly maintaining line speeds so fast, that employees become afflicted with the crippling repetitive motion syndrome in their hands.