

Jerusha Klemperer:

Ever wondered how chicken nuggets are made? There's the question of what's actually in them, which is a continual source of jokes since the dawn of their existence, but the ingredients aren't the only mystery. According to the USDA, about a half a million people work in meat processing plants, slaughtering livestock and cutting carcasses into parts. In Arkansas, which is a kind of chicken capital, they might also be making a slurry of meat and skin and bones, then breading it and frying it, and finally freezing the little pieces and strips to become chicken fingers and nuggets. Most of these workers are immigrants and many are refugees. They're largely invisible to most of us while being underpaid, overworked, and mistreated. Recently, immigration has become criminalized at the same time that the dirty and dangerous work done by those immigrants has been deemed essential — since meat, the most American of foods, is something we're told we cannot live without.

In this episode, we speak about these workers with Alice Driver, author of the 2024 book, “The Life and Death of the American Worker: The Immigrants Taking On America's Largest Meat Packing Company.” I'm Jerusha Klemperer, and this is What You're Eating, a project of FoodPrint.org. We aim to help you understand how your food gets to your plate and see the full impact of the food system on animals, planet and people. We uncover the problems with the industrial food system and offer examples of more sustainable practices, as well as practical advice for how you can help support a better system through the food that you buy and the system changes you push for.

Alice Driver:

My name is Alice Driver. I'm a writer from the Ozark Mountains in Arkansas. I grew up in a town of less than 200 people, which is relevant to the book that I published last year about the meatpacking industry because I am from the same place that is the home of the largest meatpacking company in the United States and the second largest globally, which many of you probably know is Tyson Foods.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Tyson Foods describes itself as “a modern, multinational, protein-focused food company.” They produce about 20% of the beef, pork and chicken in the United States. When it comes to chicken specifically, they're number one. And most of their poultry processing facilities are across the Midwest and South, especially in Arkansas where they were founded and are headquartered.

Alice Driver:

I didn't really plan on going back to Arkansas to live and then, like many people I think in the pandemic, I ended up back home living near my parents and then living with my parents when I got COVID. And so I really was looking at Arkansas with new eyes in terms of, it's crazy to me, Arkansas is the home of Tyson, which is a family-run company, and Walmart is run by the Walton family, the wealthiest family on this planet. And both of those companies almost completely escape any kind of investigative journalism, which I understand for legal reasons, it's very complicated to write about these companies.

But I began to look, to think, “why don't I know more about meatpacking workers?” as someone who lived in Mexico who speaks Spanish, because many of the workers are from Mexico or Central America? And that was really the origin of the beginnings of this project. Of course, in the pandemic, there was the added layer of what's going to happen to these workers during COVID. And so looking at Tyson, I looked again at the relationship, for example, with the Clinton family. Bill Clinton was very close friends with the Tysons, and it's interesting to me to come back to that because when I was growing up, he was

presented in a certain light, but he actually, like many politicians, has very close ties with big corporations, and Hillary is on the board of Walmart, for example.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Early in the book you say that a Tyson facility is like a black hole in the community. What does that mean?

Alice Driver:

Well, the interesting thing is that workers were sending me, and I worked on this, I was interviewing workers for four years and they would send me from inside work, even though it was also technically against the law for them to do this. They would send me videos and photos from facilities. And it is surreal because I look at these videos, you can't tell where you are. It's almost like you could be on Mars. It's dark, it's slippery. You're like, what is this, when you see these frozen blocks of meat, you cannot tell what they are.

So I think it really surprised me how otherworldly the facilities are in a horror landscape way and the fact that so few people understand, really, the conditions. The other day, I was talking to someone who works at a Tyson facility and they were describing the multiple levels of work and how, when you go up these really steep stairs and there's this giant basically swimming pool of chemicals and inside of it are all these chickens that are floating and boiling, and anyways, it's things that you're like, what are you talking about?

And so I really got into trying to depict that for people because most people are never going to get to see facilities. Right now, I'm teaching and I'm telling my students, "Most people don't realize how hard it is to cover the meatpacking industry." Many people, even in interviews, assume that I have spent time inside of meatpacking facilities and I have not. Arkansas is one of many states that has very strong, they're called the ag-gag laws, really protecting facilities or trade secrets, but it means that, as a journalist or as someone who wants to photograph or record something, you can't set foot on their property. And even a lot of people ask why I didn't go undercover in Arkansas? It's also against the law to go into facilities with the intent of documenting conditions. And so I feel like that's something that people don't realize.

Jerusha Klemperer:

For people who don't know what happens in a chicken processing facility? Chicken plant, meat plant, chicken processing, those words don't mean a lot to people. So what is a chicken processing facility? What's happening here?

Alice Driver:

In a facility, you have usually two sides. You have the kill floor, where you're killing the animals, and that's usually very hot. It can be covered, but technically may be outdoors or open somewhat. And then you have the processing side, for example, where you would make chicken nuggets or chicken strips, and that side is going to be cold for the most part because you're dealing with keeping the meat at the right temperature. So you're essentially working in either extremely hot or extremely cold conditions. Some workers are dealing with frostbite and things like that, and you have all these different lines for different products.

And I always ask people what work they did because it was so interesting. I had one woman say, "I spend all day cleaning chicken poop off of chicken feet," and the chicken feet are exported to China. Or the

de-bone line, which is one of the hardest jobs because you're deboning chickens and you're wearing, you basically wear a metal mesh glove on one arm and you have a knife and the other hand, and you're deboning chicken, but you're a chicken in about three to five seconds, and you're doing that all day long, for eight or 10 hours. Some of the shifts are 10 hours. And so I had workers show me the movements, what does it look like, because they're living with this every day and it's, it really changed the way I wrote the book, to see them perform that work, which requires such strength and also zero, you can't make any mistakes.

Jerusha Klemperer:

And you describe at least one worker, more than one worker, who they are doing those motions when they're not even at the plant, in their sleep, as they walk around. Just that that repetitive motion is just so in their bodies, so ingrained that they can't stop doing it.

Alice Driver:

At one point, I was telling workers about dreams that I had had and asking them about their dreams, and I was just to pass the time, not because I thought anything was going to come out of it. And a worker said to me, "I never stop working. I work in my sleep." And I said, "What do you mean? What do you actually mean by that?" And she said, "No, I've been to the doctor because I keep doing that repetitive motion. I've even scratched my husband." And so I started to ask other workers about that, "Are you working in your sleep?" And a lot of them said things like, "I never rest. There is no rest."

Jerusha Klemperer:

So who are these workers? Who is staffing a Tyson plant?

Alice Driver:

Well, in Arkansas, for example, it depends on the state, but it's primarily immigrants. And so I recently wrote a piece for The Nation about this. In this political moment where we have in power many, in the Trump administration, many men who are talking about the carnivore diet and all the meat that they eat and all these manly meat discourses that we're seeing right now, that their food, their meat, is being prepared by the immigrants that they are attempting to deport. And so in Arkansas, it's an interesting composition. We have the largest population from the Marshall Islands outside of the Marshall Islands, and so they work in the meatpacking industry. We've got a lot of workers from, in my book, it's mostly workers from Mexico and El Salvador, but also workers from Thailand, from Vietnam. At some plants, you have anywhere from 20 to 50 languages being spoken. So it's a really interesting and also challenging environment for work.

Jerusha Klemperer:

If you don't live in Arkansas, you might not be familiar with the Marshallese and their home, the Marshall Islands, they're a series of islands and atolls located in between Hawaii and the Philippines. They were once occupied by the Japanese, and then after World War II, the U.S. had them under a trusteeship and used the land for a ton of nuclear testing, which left it dangerously irradiated. So many Marshallese left the islands and moved to the U.S. where they're allowed to live as part of a unique agreement. The U.S. military continues occupying several island nations and is supposed to be offering economic aid and reparations for nuclear testing. There are about 12,000 Marshallese in Springdale, Arkansas. For the Marshallese and other workers, the daily physical labor of slaughtering and processing

chickens causes a lot of health and safety problems, everything from repetitive motion injuries to more grievous ones, like amputation.

Alice Driver:

One of the big problems which has been really documented and studied across the meatpacking industry is chemical, I mean, the industry often says a chemical leak or a chemical accident. And that's really how my book begins because, when I was interviewing workers, I was really focused on COVID conditions, but many workers went back to a chemical accident that occurred at a Springdale facility in 2011 that damaged their lungs because you have a lot of ammonia in these facilities to keep things cool and you're working conditions where, according to workers, most of the instructions are in English and many of the workers do not speak English. And so they often feel that they're being asked to do things that are unclear, especially when you're mixing chemicals.

Jerusha Klemperer:

In 2011, 173 Tyson plant workers were hospitalized after being overcome by chemical fumes. That leak was the worst in recent history, but it was certainly not the only one. When ammonia and chlorine are combined, they create a toxic gas called chloramine that can cause eye damage, severe lung injury and, in worst case scenarios, death.

Alice Driver:

In my book, there are workers who die of COVID, but many of them first had lung damage due to a chemical accident, and that's something that workers complain about constantly.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Yeah, that gut punch, that emotional gut punch in the book was just really powerful to understand that many of these workers ended up with a pre-existing condition, one that was caused by their work at the plant, that was ignored by the healthcare staff, the in-house healthcare staff within the company, and then that they were sent back in to work during COVID when we all now know that people with respiratory issues were the most vulnerable to the impacts of COVID, it's really devastating to really see that timeline.

Alice Driver:

For me, one of the most powerful things that I listened to that's in the book is workers would send me also recordings of conversations with managers and supervisors at facilities, and one of the supervisors has this long speech, a worker who's a father, he has four kids, he's worried about COVID, he's worried about his kids getting COVID and he goes to discuss it with his supervisor. And the supervisor says, "Millions of Americans are going to starve. Do you want that to happen? You're going to go home and not work because you're worried about COVID, but people are going to starve because you're not here working."

Jerusha Klemperer:

Yes. Let's dig into this COVID moment and how meatpacking plants ended up as this political wedge. We had a feeling at the time, and we knew pretty quickly thereafter that this was a false narrative. No one was going to starve if the meatpacking plants slowed down or shut down for two weeks, a month. There

are storehouses full of frozen meat. The meat was being sent to China that was being produced. No Americans were going to starve if the plants protected their workers.

Alice Driver:

Well, what I discovered really quickly, what workers said is that when they tested positive for COVID, they were told, "We need you to keep working." And many people ask me, "Oh, why didn't they quit?" Many of these workers, like one of the main workers in my book, she is from Guatemala, she's illiterate. She never went to school. And so many of these people didn't have the option to quit. And so that part of that is that, so it's like either you stay home because you're worried about COVID and you don't have a job in the pandemic or you keep working. And so meatpacking facilities became the greatest site of infection for COVID, aside from prisons.

Jerusha Klemperer:

There are a lot of things that the companies could have done right then, and you detail some of them. They could have provided protections for their workers, like PPE but no. They had them, in some cases, sew their own masks, things like that. They did not provide protections. They didn't slow down or shut down the lines. None of this happened.

Alice Driver:

Well, it's super interesting because at the time, the meatpacking companies like Tyson were meeting, for example, with Vice President Pence and really lobbying the Trump administration. And out of those meetings came the executive order that meatpacking facilities had to stay open. And so there's a really detailed government report on all of that, on the influence of the meatpacking companies, on Tyson. And that right after they met with the Trump administration, that Vice President Pence and other members of the administration came out and said, "This is an essential, we all need this meat or we're going to starve." And so I think that is interesting, especially in the context of this current Trump administration.

Jerusha Klemperer:

In late April of 2020, Tyson took out a full page ad in the New York Times with a letter from their CEO imploring that a shutdown or a slowdown of their meatpacking plants would result in the disappearance of meat from grocery shelves and Americans going hungry. Shortly thereafter, the White House issued a presidential executive order to keep meat and poultry processing facilities open during the lockdown as a matter of emergency. Two years later, a congressional investigation found that Tyson and other meat companies had essentially written the executive order, providing the White House with a draft that was extremely similar to the one that was released a week later. In late 2020, there were also state laws that were passed called liability shield laws that were meant to prevent workers from suing employers over their COVID infections.

Alice Driver:

So in Arkansas, for example, and this happened in other states, Arkansas passed a liability law that basically said that if you are a worker, you cannot sue a company for anything related to COVID. And this comes into play in my book because the workers in my book organized a class-action lawsuit against Tyson, and they file it and then they do not win the lawsuit. And the response from the court was partially based on the liability issue.

Jerusha Klemperer:

So the picture that really emerges is that no one is protecting these workers, whether it's from an ammonia spill or crippling carpal tunnel or COVID or anything else. Who should be protecting workers? Where is the failure here?

Alice Driver:

So OSHA should be protecting workers. And even at the time I wrote my book, I include a data point, which has probably changed, but that OSHA has been understaffed through, and this is through Democratic and Republican administrations and it really speaks to the power of the meatpacking lobby. And I really wanted to make that point in my book, that it's a bipartisan issue, the power of the meatpacking industry. So OSHA is so understaffed that it would've taken, I think, something like 160 years for the staff to visit every facility. And so part of it is that at many facilities, there isn't much oversight and there just aren't enough people working on these issues. And I'm continuing to write about some of these issues and I was in contact with some different people before Trump came into office, and he tried to get rid of a lot of staff by offering buyouts and early retirement, all of that. So I can only imagine that there are less people working at OSHA now than there were.

Jerusha Klemperer:

So that of course feels by design, that the Office of Worker Safety and Health would be non-existent or lack the resources that it needs. Also by design is something you said, which is that the labor of undocumented workers underpins our food system. That is just a fact. It just does. But how is that also by design?

Alice Driver:

It is a fact and in the meatpacking industry, and the studies are varied, they say anywhere from 20 to 50% of the workforce could be undocumented, but it is a large percentage and it's also true across agriculture, that our food system really is upheld by undocumented labor, and it is by design because it's a population that is going to have a hard time complaining about any labor issue, organizing, making a legal case, all those things are going to be really difficult, especially in times where they're worried about being deported.

Jerusha Klemperer:

And certainly in your conversations with workers, it was quite clear that the companies know that people are undocumented.

Alice Driver:

Well, it's interesting because with the way that the U.S. law is related to companies is that as long as someone presents legal documentation, like a social security card or whatever it is that companies aren't required to, and they're not in charge of enforcement, essentially, or analyzing those documents. So right now, we're in a moment where companies are completely denying this. Earlier this year, I think Tyson executives said, "We've never knowingly hired an undocumented person," or something like that. But yes, I would say yes. Just like I know that undocumented workers make up a large portion of our food system, both meatpacking and agriculture. I think anybody would know that.

Jerusha Klemperer:

So it puts us in a really strange moment right now. And this moment comes after your book came out, the hardcover came out about a year ago, and so it was before the new administration came in or came back in and began its really severe immigration crackdown by ICE that we've all watched unfold over mainstream media and social media. It's a strange moment because you've described in the book how companies like Tyson have really been connected to politicians since the get-go, and they've been part and parcel of institutionalizing the deregulation of things like safety or all of the things that they're allowed to do. But now also it's politicians who are coming after their workforce.

Alice Driver:

Well, it's interesting because in Arkansas, there haven't yet been raids of meatpacking facilities, which I find, I'm like, I really wonder what's going on behind the scenes with meatpacking lobbying. Workers are afraid. They say things like, "We were heroes in the pandemic, we were essential, and now we're trash, and now you're going to throw us out?" And one worker in particular, she's a labor organizer and she has two kids, and she was in the process of getting asylum, but she got really scared and she quit. She basically went into hiding early in the Trump administration because she was worried about being caught up in a raid and deported and her kids being here with no, or being sent to a foster home. And I do think that's something that is what's happening to the children of all these workers who are being deported.

Jerusha Klemperer:

It seems unlikely that whatever leeway these companies are being given, that it will continue. But also if you think about our country's commitment to meat, in particular, the vegetables can rot in the fields, but we can't let the meatpacking plants stop producing meat.

Alice Driver:

And there's another thing that I think is really important to highlight. So in 2023, I was still doing interviews for my book and I was interviewing workers in Green Forest, Arkansas, which is, it's a town of about 3,000, but it's also where the largest meatpacking, the Tyson facility is. And at that time, the United States Labor Department had started investigating child labor in Arkansas, and they found six children working at that facility where I was doing interviews, working the night shift, which is the cleaning shift. And so I started thinking, what is happening in Arkansas, which is often like the South is the first place you see really the rollback of labor rights.

And at that same time, a report came out in Arkansas saying that child labor violations were up 266%. And that same year, the Arkansas governor, Sarah Sanders, who's the former speaker of President Trump, signed into law, it's called the Arkansas Youth Hiring Act of 2023, which rolled back child labor regulations. Even in Florida, you've seen Governor Ron DeSantis say, "Oh, because we're deporting all these workers, we actually need children to be doing these jobs." So I find it ... it gives me chills, but I find it really interesting that a lot of lawmakers are saying out loud these things like, "Oh, we need children to replace these workers that we are deporting."

Jerusha Klemperer:

Speaking of which you had mentioned earlier, you mentioned prison, and I did want to also chat for a moment about who else is doing meat processing work in addition to immigrants and refugees and

children, another vulnerable population being forced to work in some cases, in Arkansas for free, our prisoners?

Alice Driver:

Yeah. So this was a surprise to me. It wasn't something that was on my radar, but I was interviewing workers and they were complaining about certain days of the week they were working next to prisoners, because Tyson does use prison labor through a work release program. And in Arkansas, I always try to go back and see what the origin of something is because of the history of Arkansas. And so I was looking at what prisons are these workers coming from? And one of the prisons is Cummins unit, which is, it was built on the site of a plantation. It is a prison where all the imprisoned people work on a farm. They grow corn, they grow watermelons. It is a prison with a overwhelming population of people of color, even though Arkansas is a state that's overwhelmingly white. And so they grow corn. Who buys corn from the prison?

Jerusha Klemperer:

Tyson.

Alice Driver:

Tyson, and prisoners in Arkansas paid \$0. And so that, I just thought, I have got to look into this. So I interviewed a former in prison person who had worked on the farm and grown corn, and that could be a whole nother book because I didn't have time to get into the details of that, but I mean, it's that going from plantation to prison to growing corn, being paid nothing, and it's for a corporation, a global corporation.

Jerusha Klemperer:

So in the book, you cover some of the organizing that workers start to do in Arkansas around the time that you were writing the book, and you mentioned earlier their dismissed or failed lawsuit against Tyson, unfortunately. But can you talk about what Venceremos is working on now, if you know, and if you see any hope for worker based organizing in this moment, which is even more favorable to big business in this moment of immigration crackdowns? What hope do you see, if any?

Alice Driver:

Yeah, so Venceremos is an Arkansas-based, it's a worker-based organization made up of poultry workers who are organizing around labor issues. And for me, that was the really beautiful and hopeful part of my book and of seeing workers organizing around issues like child labor, conditions during COVID and meeting with other organizers in, for example, the milk industry or the construction industry, and really learning about organizing and working together and coordinating. And it's something that Arkansas might be the hardest place in the country to organize in terms of anti-labor sentiment and then the power of the two large corporations in the state. But at the same time, what they have done is really radical because for the first time, right after my book came out, for the first time in my life, I saw poultry workers in person sharing their experience with people in the community.

And I also recently worked on a podcast with poultry workers in Spanish. I mean, getting poultry workers to speak publicly. I mean, they face so many different forms of retaliation. And so I think Venceremos has made the space for workers to sometimes feel that they can share their experiences. And I do think it's

having an impact. I do know that despite, we've got the Trump administration really cutting down on staffing of the labor department and OSHA and et cetera. But in terms of Arkansas, I do know that out of this, all the work that Venceremos has done, that filmmakers are coming to Arkansas. There's a lot of really interesting projects that are happening that will share the story of workers on a global level that a corporation cannot stop. So one of the most powerful scenes in the book for me or experiences that I had was that I flew to Immokalee, Florida with Arkansas poultry workers in Venceremos.

And this group of workers, many of them had never seen the ocean, for example. And that's one of the first things that we did when we got to Florida. But we met with the Coalition of Immokalee workers, which is a, it has a long history of organizing, it's a worker-led organization. So agricultural workers are leading the charge against what they call slave conditions on farms. And they're really holding companies to account. They try and inform the public and put pressure on companies to make changes about where they source, for example, tomatoes.

And Arkansas workers, I mean in Arkansas, it's such an environment of fear. I don't think anybody can understand what it's like to work on any kind of labor issue in Arkansas. So these workers, the poultry workers, were just so moved seeing agriculture workers speaking out, organizing, marching in public, things that, in Arkansas, hadn't necessarily happened yet. And so I felt like it was a real turning point because some workers, they have very little time, they have very little money. Some of them are like, "What am I doing here organizing?" Because it seems so hard to make change. And I think going to Florida and witnessing the success of Immokalee really had an impact on the Venceremos workers.

Jerusha Klemperer:

That's great. Thank you. I needed a little bit of hope.

Jerusha Klemperer: Tyson, of course, is a huge company with a lot of power, both in Arkansas and on the federal stage. I asked her if she ever heard from Tyson or their lawyers in response to the book.

Alice Driver:

So I was very fortunate that in the process of writing the book, I had multiple legal reviews. And when the book was finished, Cornell Law School took on the book as a pro bono project. I mean, I was living in complete paralysis and fear when the book was about to be published just because I'm an individual, and Tyson is a company that made \$53 billion last year. And so having the support of the law school helped me get to that point. Everything in that book is nailed down, and I haven't heard from Tyson. They do respond to, for example, when the New Yorker wrote a short review of my book, they did respond saying most of the information in this book is not true, or something like that, which is fine. They can respond whatever they want, but I think anybody who reads the book will know the truth.

Jerusha Klemperer:

You mentioned this earlier with the description of some of the interiors and the plan and what happens there, but descriptions of chicken nuggets being made and all the various things that might end up in your nuggets known and unknown was pretty chilling. So do you want to eat meat on that level? But obviously, there's a moral question that emerges after reading a book like this, and I'm curious if you feel that there is a way to eat meat or chicken and not be culpable or complicit in this system?

Alice Driver:

I mean, that's a great question, and a lot of people ask me that. I did stop eating meat while writing this book. I don't eat meat. I grew up, and I talk about this a little bit in my book, my parents were part of the back-to-land movement. They continue to grow their own food. When I was little, they had chickens and they butchered chickens themselves. And so I do think that part of my interest in the food system is rooted in that, the radical act of sustainability. And so for me, I always tell people, we all need to be eating less meat. We all do, however you want to go about that. I don't think it's helpful in terms of discourse to shame people or make them feel bad or make them disgusted. I think everyone should have the information that's in my book and everyone should be thinking about eating less meat for our planet, for labor. And if you want to eat meat, get it from someone you know. Get it from a farmer.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Thank you so much for this book. I learned so much. And also thank you for making this time to come and talk with us today.

Alice Driver:

Oh, thank you for having me.

Jerusha Klemperer:

What You're Eating is produced by Nathan Dalton and FoodPrint.org, which is a project of the GRACE Communications Foundation. Special thanks to Alice Driver. You can find us at www.FoodPrint.org, where we have a meat label guide as well as many articles and reports on worker welfare and other impacts of industrial meat production.