



COMING HOME TO ROOST THE HIDDEN IMPACTS OF A POWERFUL POULTRY INDUSTRY ON MIDDLE GEORGIA RESIDENTS

OCTOBER 2023 | A REPORT FROM THE MOREHOUSE COLLEGE INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE LABOR STUDIES



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"All labor has dignity."

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COMING HOME TO ROOST THE HIDDEN IMPACTS OF A POWERFUL POULTRY INDUSTRY ON MIDDLE GEORGIA RESIDENTS

The modern commercial poultry industry in the U.S. operates as a plantation economy, according to some experts and labor leaders.¹ Middle Georgia's poultry industry operates very much in this tradition. At the bottom rung of the economic ladder sit mostly women, Blacks and Latinos, and non-union workers from economically distressed communities. At the top of the ladder stand powerful companies that act as overseers rather than employers. Their outsized influence extends from the political arena to civil society.

The poultry industry is controlled by large companies, such as Perdue Farms and Tyson Foods, that have outsized power and influence. "Big Poultry," as they are called, relies almost exclusively on captive labor—people with limited employment opportunities who are forced to abide by a workplace culture that is dictated by the region's weak labor laws, low wages, dangerous work practices, and a broken workers' compensation system. Workplace abuses are hidden or unknown to the average Georgian with no direct ties to the commercial poultry industry.

Coming Home to Roost: The Hidden Impacts of a Powerful Poultry Industry on Middle Georgia Residents looks at the power of the commercial poultry industry in Middle Georgia. The study includes a 500-person survey conducted in 2022 of Middle Georgians from 15 counties with an oversample of African Americans; an assessment of 26 workers from two poultry plants in Middle Georgia; and three focus groups of community leaders in Houston, Bibb, and Dooly Counties.

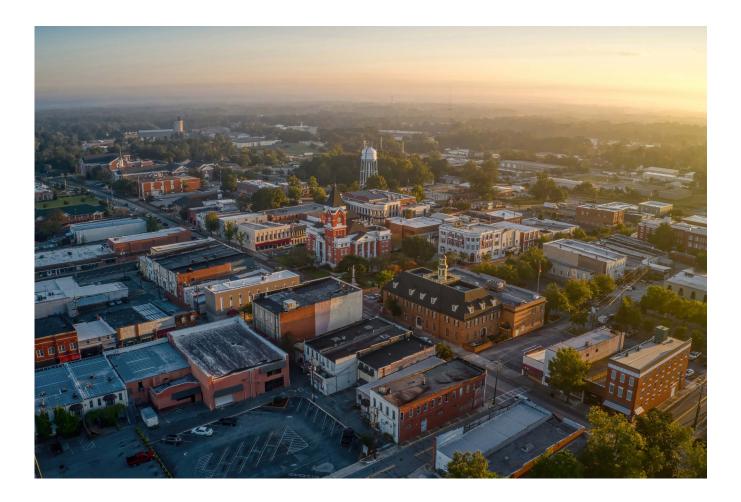
Overall, Coming Home to Roost reveals the following trends.

- Dissatisfaction among poultry workers reflects a broader discontent among all Middle Georgians about fairness and protections in the workplace.
- Middle Georgians recognize Big Poultry's expansive power.
- Middle Georgians strongly support regulation and oversight of the poultry industry.
- Middle Georgians, across race and gender, strongly support policies that regulate the commercial poultry industry.²
- Middle Georgia is a diverse region comprised of the cities of Macon and Warner Robins, plus small municipalities that drive the regional economy. There is an urban-rural divide with poultry companies located in sparsely populated areas. The area has limited childcare and public transportation options, particularly in rural parts of the region.

The Introduction of the report provides an overview of the industry; Section 1 goes into Workplace Dissatisfaction; Section 2 examines The Power of the Poultry Industry; Section 3 considers Regulation and Oversight of the Poultry Industry; Section 4 looks at Race, Regulation, and Oversight; and Section 5 probes Gender, Regulation, and Oversight.

INTRODUCTION

COMING HOME TO ROOST THE HIDDEN IMPACTS OF A POWERFUL POULTRY INDUSTRY ON MIDDLE GEORGIA RESIDENTS



Georgia is the "top poultry production state in the nation."³ It is the "poultry capital of the world"⁴ with exports overseas reaching nearly \$1.2 billion in 2021.⁵ Nearly 88,000 people are employed in four dozen poultry processing companies in the state.⁶ In September 2022, Georgia chicken production was worth over \$4.3 billion with an estimated economic impact in the state of \$28 billion.⁷

The power of Georgia poultry extends into the political arena and civil society. In 2012, Congressman Sanford Bishop (D-GA) co-founded the Poultry Caucus (also called the Chicken Caucus) in the U.S. House of Representatives in order to "educate other members of Congress about the concerns of the U.S. chicken industry."⁶ Before his retirement in 2021, Congressman Doug Collins (R-GA) was the leading voice for Big Poultry's push to increase line speeds in processing plants from 140 to 175 birds per minute.⁹

Groups such as the National Chicken Council, United Poultry Growers Association, and Georgia Poultry Federation augment poultry's economic influence. Companies such as Perdue and Tyson Foods regularly make donations to Georgia's food banks.¹⁰ Tyson, the "largest American and global poultry producer,"¹¹ is the main sponsor of HBCU baseball's Black College World Series.¹² Its corporate giving division regularly donates \$25,000 grants to nonprofit and charitable organizations located in communities near poultry production facilities.

The "vertical integration" of commercial poultry has enhanced the power of the largest companies.¹³ A company like Perdue or Tyson "control[s] production from the egg to the grocery store,"¹⁴ whereas prior to the 1960s, different companies were responsible for hatching, growing, feeding, and processing chickens. This integration means that smaller companies, farmers, and workers have lost their foothold in the state's poultry economy.

The vertical integration of poultry underscores how it has evolved into a plantation economy. In this configuration, workers' life circumstances, workplace safety, and quality of life are under constant threat by Big Poultry. This alignment has also placed Middle Georgia poultry workers in an unenviable position that is comparable to other groups of low-wage workers in the country. They are employed by the world's most powerful collection of poultry companies whose economic standing thrives from a low-wage and non-union workforce.

This report focuses on the poultry industry's impact in Middle Georgia. The area is home to two Big Poultry plants: Tyson Foods in Vienna (located in Dooly County) and Perdue Farms, Inc., in Perry (a city split between Houston and Peach Counties). Blacks make up most of the workers in the poultry plants,¹⁵ although there has been a steady influx of Latin American workers into the Tyson facility since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.¹⁶

Both plants are in rural parts of the counties, but Houston County has a greater economic advantage than Dooly and Peach. Houston County is home to Robins Air Force Base. Located 13 miles from Tyson Foods, the base is the largest industrial installation in Georgia.¹⁷

In the poultry counties (Dooly, Houston, and Peach), Blacks make up 42% of the population. Males are 54% of the population in Dooly, while females make up a majority of the population (up to 52%) in Houston and Peach. Dooly has older residents with more than one-fourth (25.8%) age 65 years and above. Elderly residents make up 21% of Peach residents and slightly above 17% of Houston residents. Dooly is the poorest of the three counties with over 22% living at or below the poverty line, compared to 19% in Peach and 11% in Houston. In all three counties, Blacks make considerably less money than Whites and even Latinos. The median family incomes for Whites ranges from 36%–51% greater than those of Blacks in the three counties. Latinos make between 7.1%–27% more than Blacks in these counties.¹⁸

For this report, we incorporate Dougherty County (home to the City of Albany) in Middle Georgia. Although it is considered outside of the region, Dougherty residents travel to Dooly to work in the Tyson plant. The average population per county (across 15 counties in the study) is 43,078 people. Bibb with a population of 156,000 and Houston with 162,000 are the largest counties. Taylor County is the least populated with slightly under 8,000 people. The average White population is 52% and men and women are evenly divided across the region.¹⁹

SECTION 1: Workplace Dissatisfaction

What Middle Georgians Are Most Unhappy with in the Workplace

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Workplace dissatisfaction is rampant in Middle Georgia. It is the tie that binds poultry and non-poultry workers in the region. A 2022 survey of 500 Middle Georgians revealed that they are unhappy with their health care, quality of wages, vacation benefits, paid sick leave, time for breaks, work start time, opportunities for being promoted, retirement plan, relations with immediate supervisor, flexible work hours, and physical safety. We refer to this as workplace dissatisfaction or unhappiness. The unhappiness scores on all 11 measures (a higher percentage indicates more unhappiness with work conditions) ranged from 61.6% (promotion opportunities) to 80% (having a convenient work start time). On six of the 11 measures, three-fourths of Middle Georgians were not happy with their work conditions. For example, at least 74% said they were unhappy with their wages, relations with immediate supervisors, break time, and work hours. A greater percentage of respondents had unfavorable opinions about their work start time and physical safety.

A former poultry employee at the Tyson plant in Dooly County described his typical day:

I go in at 2:00 p.m. and hit the floor at 2:40 p.m. You have from 2:00 to 2:40 p.m. to put on your Personal Protective Equipment [PPE]. I work at the live hang—where the live chickens come in on a belt and you hang them on a metal shackle. You do this for four hours, take a 45-minute break, and then you come back. For this shift, you're going to have to work. The supervisors set a goal . . . before the night is over—usually by 11:30 p.m. It's a rough, tough job. You go in there wanting to do the job and not complain. I would go in there and bust my butt every day. My supervisor would push me to a level where it would be total exhaustion.²²

Injuries to arms, wrists, back, fingers, cartilage, and tendons, plus emotional distress, are common among poultry workers.²³ Higher line speed requirements—requiring more birds be processed per minute—have caused more injuries.²⁴ During the initial months of the pandemic, the spread of COVID-19 at poultry plants was attributed to pressure to keep line speeds high.²⁵

Scrutiny of workplace safety in the commercial poultry industry increased due to COVID-19's disruption of the food supply chain in 2020 and the spread of COVID-19 infections at poultry plants.²⁶ In the initial months of the pandemic, infections spread rapidly across the country due to the lack of social distancing, weak oversight by the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration,²⁷ and because workers had little access to Personal Protective Equipment.²⁸ Between April and September 2020, at least 42,700 documented infections of COVID-19 occurred at meat and poultry plants leading to over 200 deaths.²⁹

Additional investigations found widespread COVID-19 infections at Georgia's poultry plants. At least 14 Georgia plants reported COVID-19 outbreaks between March and May 2020.³⁰ Perdue workers in Houston walked out in protest over the failed safety protocols. Kendaliyn Granville, a plant worker, stated: "We're not getting nothing— no type of compensation, no nothing, not even . . . cleanliness, no extra pay—no nothing. We're up here risking our life for chicken."³¹ Tanisha Isom, who worked at a Tyson plant in Camila located outside of Albany, told *The New York Times:* "How many more [poultry workers] have to fight for their life, how many more families got to suffer before they realize we are more important than their production . . . our work conditions are out of control. We literally work shoulder to shoulder daily."³² At least three workers died at her plant in the initial months of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Many workers at the Middle Georgia facilities are burdened with the costs of paying for essential safety equipment, particularly boots and gloves. Less than two-thirds of the workers said their employers paid for the full cost of PPE needed to protect against the spread of COVID-19. Although two-thirds of the workers received instructions about safety protocols when hired, only one-third regularly attended meetings about workplace safety. (A labor organizer explained that the meetings were sporadic and undervalued by supervisors.) Almost two-thirds said that workers have total control over their personal safety.

Poultry workers are under tremendous emotional and mental health distress. Supervisors undervalue employees who adhere to safety protocols. Only 7 of 26 workers (26.9%) said they had been praised for complying with safety protocols. Only two-thirds reported being made aware of dangerous conditions and nearly half said a workplace injury is likely to occur in the next 12 months. Close to half said safety is not very important to management.

SECTION 2: The Power of the Poultry Industry

Middle Georgians fully recognize the outsized influence of the poultry industry in the state and its linkage to the global marketplace. Over 90% of Middle Georgians in the survey agreed that the poultry industry is vital to the Georgia economy. More than 60% stated that Big Poultry companies may threaten to leave the state if forced to pay additional taxes and fees, suggesting that there is fear that regulation of the industry will lead to job loss and economic hardship.

Big Poultry's vast influence makes it hard for workers and their allies to successfully challenge the industry when abuses occur. The reported problems in commercial poultry involve wage theft and harsh work rules, such as the denial of basic accommodations and bathroom breaks, weak workers' compensation enforcement, and occupational and safety hazards.³³

Commercial poultry companies routinely circumvent oversight and standard occupational protocols. One of their strategies is to temporarily lay off workers, provide them with reduced payments when they are not working, and then rehire them. This strategy allegedly allows a company to avoid unemployment compensation. A Georgia Department of Labor employee in the Dooly focus group, who Over 90% of Middle Georgians in the survey agreed that the poultry industry is vital to the Georgia economy.

investigated complaints at the Tyson plant, said: "We get several calls weekly about conditions and treatment and things of that nature, and who can they call to file a complaint and things like that."³⁴ In the Houston focus group session, a civil rights leader said she received "a lot of complaints" from workers at the Perdue plant.³⁵ Both focus group participants said workers at the two plants routinely complain about unsafe work conditions and bad infrastructure.

In low-wage sectors, unions can act as guardrails to monitor workplace abuse and safety protocols. Michael Menifee, a representative of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) International Union, indicated that some workers are hopeful about unionization, while others seem to be trapped by the power of Big Poultry. For the latter group of workers, "there is a mindset that conditions have been bad for a long time, and they won't change. So, there is apathy. A lot of workers know conditions need to change, but they are fearful."³⁶ These workers come from under-resourced communities where there are few opportunities to earn a living wage.

Although poultry workers in Middle Georgia are non-unionized and only 8% of Middle Georgians are from union families, nearly half of the surveyed respondents support unionized workforces.³⁷ Almost two-thirds of Middle Georgians in the survey believe unions can effectively help advance racial equality.

"Almost two-thirds of Middle Georgians in the survey believe unions can effectively help advance racial equality."

SECTION 3:

Regulation and Oversight of the Poultry Industry

Despite the poultry industry's power, Middle Georgians believe oversight is necessary to monitor wastes and operations. Over half (50.2%) believe oversight of poultry's handling of waste should increase. Nearly half (48.4%) supported an increase in oversight of poultry industry operations. Over 70% stated that they are more favorable to a governor who increases oversight of the poultry industry.

The great majority of Middle Georgians believe "Big Poultry companies such as Tyson Foods and Perdue Chicken must do their part to keep Georgia's drinking water supply safe from the effects of chicken waste runoff." They also believe Big Poultry should pay their fair share to remove chicken waste from local farms that contaminate their communities. Environmental policies that regulate poultry plants that cause pollution and public health crises won support among three-fourths of Middle Georgians.

Middle Georgia, Commercial Poultry, and Environmental Accountability

73%

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Agree with Adopting Strong Environment Policies

85.6%

Agree with Making Sure Poultry Industry Keeps Drinking Water Safe

79.2%

Agree Poultry Industry Needs to Pay Fair Share for Chicken Waste Removal

These sentiments underscore concerns about poultry-related contaminates and pollution.³⁸ A considerable number of Middle Georgians are directly impacted by environmental hazards. For example, one-tenth of Middle Georgians live near a poultry plant and 12% live near a landfill. Nearly 14% have poor drinking water and bad air quality and 17% are impacted by pollution.³⁹ These conditions make Middle Georgians acutely sensitive to environmental justice concerns. Watchdog groups have called for more regulation of commercial poultry to protect the water supply and fertile land. State regulators routinely allow poultry companies to circumvent the monitoring and enforcement of federal environmental laws. Strengthening federal laws such as the Clean Water Act and pressure by the Environmental Protection Agency on state regulators to limit the discharge of poultry waste can mitigate pollution from poultry plants.⁴¹

SECTION 4:

Race, Regulation, and Oversight of the Poultry Industry

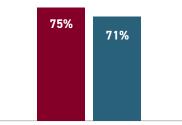
It is important to look at how race shapes perspectives toward the poultry industry among Middle Georgians, particularly considering that Blacks make up the bulk of the workforce at the region's two major plants.

Race remains at the forefront of the poultry industry. Blacks were drawn into poultry during the expansion of commercial production.⁴¹ This was a period when union membership experienced a downward spiral in the top poultry states in the South. Georgia's unionization rate was 14% in 1968, yet by 2018 (in keeping with the suppression of unions nationwide) it fell to below 5%.⁴² On the assembly lines across the South, Black women made up a sizable portion of the workforce from the 1960s to the 1990s with many experiencing sexual harassment, maltreatment, and oppressive labor conditions.⁴³

As part of the reaction against the successes of the civil rights and labor movements in the 1960s, labor intensive industries sought to replace protected workforces with more vulnerable workers, particularly immigrant workers. This strategy created a sort of "ethnic succession"⁴⁴ with Latin American immigrants replacing Blacks in many poultry plants in the South in the 1990s.⁴⁵ Somali workers have even replaced Latinos in some parts of the South in the past decade.⁴⁶ However, Blacks still comprise most of the workforce at the Perdue and Tyson plants in Middle Georgia.

Looking at Middle Georgian perspectives more broadly, over half of Blacks (53.2%) and slightly under half of Whites (47%) supported oversight of the way poultry industries handle wastes. Blacks were more likely than Whites to support oversight of the operations of poultry industries, although the difference between the groups is not that wide. Whites at 77% compared to Blacks at nearly 71% indicated that they would look at a governor in favorable terms if she or he pushed for more oversight of the poultry industry.

Likewise, between 76%–86% of Blacks and Whites believe that poultry companies must pay their fair share for waste removal and do their part to keep the drinking water safe. The adoption of strong environmental regulations of chicken plants received significant support among Blacks at 75% and Whites at nearly 71%. 76%-86% of Blacks and Whites believe that poultry companies must pay their fair share for waste removal and do their part to keep drinking water supply safe.



The adoption of strong environmental regulations of chicken plants received significant support among Blacks at 75% and Whites at nearly 71%.

SECTION 5:

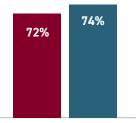
Gender, Regulation, and Oversight of the Poultry Industry

Gender is another factor that shapes the poultry industry. Sexual harassment and discrimination are rampant at the plants. Michael Menifee of the UFCW organized workers at the two sites in Middle Georgia. He said, "Workers complained that supervisors made sexual advances at young women employees as attempts to ask for sexual favors in exchange for promotion or pay raise."⁴⁷ UFCW advised the women to report the complaints to the plants' human resources divisions or to their corporate offices. Yet, it is unclear if the issues were resolved. What is clear is that these women had few options to find work outside of the poultry plants. In fact, three-quarters of the 26 workers interviewed for the study were women and 23 out of 26 had a high school degree or less.

Women with extenuating caregiving responsibilities face more pressures from poultry employers. A focus group participant in Macon assisted a worker at the Perdue plant who had a sick child. She stated that "working conditions were so bad that she [the poultry worker] couldn't stay . . . you have to work so many days before you can get a day off. But, if you got a sick child and no family, then you're up the creek without a paddle if you say, hey I can't come in today."⁴⁸ Poultry workers in these circumstances mostly women—face stiff penalties if they miss work because of childcare responsibilities. Most poultry companies' attendance policies are governed by a "point" system. Workers will accrue points if they miss consecutive workdays. Too many points accrued can lead to workers being fired, suspended, or to the loss of scheduled days off.⁴⁹

Looking at Middle Georgians broadly, between 47%–52% of men and women support oversight of how poultry companies manage wastes and how they operate. And 71%–75% of both groups favor a governor who supports oversight of the industry.

Women and men strongly believe regulations are needed to monitor the poultry industry. At least 75% of both groups believe the industry needs to pay the costs for chicken waste removal and must do their part to keep the drinking supply safe. Strong environmental regulations received 72% support among women and 74% among men. 75% of both men and women believe the industry needs to pay the costs for chicken waste removal and must do their part to keep the drinking supply safe.



Strong environmental regulations received 72% support among women and 74% among men.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Coming Home to Roost provides a much-needed look at the power of the poultry industry in Middle Georgia. The poultry industry operates a plantation-style economy that exploits its most vulnerable workers. Big Poultry has outsized influence in civil society and political and economic circles.

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Middle Georgians recognize the power of the poultry industry, yet they also believe in regulatory oversight of commercial poultry industries, particularly when tied to policy outputs that protect land and water from poultrydriven contamination. Although there are some racial and gender differences across Middle Georgians' experiences of the poultry industry, Blacks and Whites as well as men and women favor robust regulations.

This report centers on the experiences of poultry workers. Poultry workers face exhaustive work environments and unsafe conditions. They have concerns about labor protections and appropriate safety equipment in the era of COVID-19. They have an urgent need for more social safety net programs such as affordable childcare. These larger concerns reflect a broader sense of workplace dissatisfaction among most Middle Georgians.

In the poultry plantation economy, the most vulnerable and essential workers routinely suffer from poor health outcomes and diminished quality of life, wealth inequality, and limited social mobility. Overcoming these barriers requires engagement of academic researchers in monitoring and reporting sustained organizing by communitylabor coalitions and regular monitoring of workplace safety and protocols.

Experts say these recommendations can improve conditions for poultry workers and address larger concerns about regulatory oversight of the commercial poultry industry.

- Poultry workers need policies that prioritize workplace safety, such as lower line speeds and regular inspections. Federal agencies such as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) must develop workplace regulations that monitor abuses and injuries in poultry plants. Worker representatives must accompany inspectors to guarantee transparency and center worker voices in oversight activities.
- Unions are vital to enhancing the power of poultry workers. They can give poultry workers a
 more potent voice in state legislative debates, and monitor environmental hazards caused
 by the poultry industry. Yet, if unions are to be a leverage against Big Poultry's plantation
 economy, it will require worker education, an understanding of labor contracts, and strategies for
 mediating workplace disputes. This work must also be anchored by community-labor solidarity
 coalitions that engender strong support from advocacy and civic groups in Middle Georgia and
 across the state.
- Unions and advocacy groups must pressure lawmakers to adopt regulations that require poultry companies to reduce pollution and contamination discharged from their plants. The policies must put the burden of costs on the poultry plants and not on the taxpayers. There is strong support for these policies, across socio-demographic groups, particularly when they are linked with protecting the water supply and land.

Notes

- ¹ Some scholars and labor leaders believe industries such as commercial poultry operate like modern-day plantation economies. See Sophia M. Kline, Pecking The Hands That Feed Them: How Society and Government Have Allowed The Poultry Industry To Exploit Labor and The Environment In The American South, Honors College Undergraduate Thesis, University of Mississippi, Spring 2020, 18. King, et. al., further state that the marginalization of southern Blacks is a "legacy" of the plantation economy. See Katrina Quisumbing King, "Black Agrarianism: The Significance of African American Landownership in the Rural South," Rural Sociology vol. 83, no. 3 (2018): 681-682. Gremelspa refers to the "residuals of a plantation economy" to describe economic and racial hierarchies in the Deep South. See Megan Gremelspa, Ideology, Political Power, and Economic Development in Alabama, 1990-2010, A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Cornell University In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, 2012, 24-25. Rev. James Lawson, a prominent civil rights and labor activist, uses the phrase "plantation capitalism" to describe exploitative industries. See James M. Lawson, Jr. and Andrew Stelzer "What's Wrong with the Social Justice Movement?," Race, Poverty & the Environment, vol. 17, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 80-81.
- ² We use crosstabulations to examine the impact of race and gender on Middle Georgian attitudes toward the poultry industry. We emphasize the results that are statistically significant, which is a standard metric used in randomized surveys to indicate that findings are not due to chance. See Steven Tenny and Ibrahim Abdelgawad, "Statistical Significance," StatPearls, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK459346, July 10, 2020.
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- ¹⁰ Trade Show News Network, "Tyson Foods, National Association of Convenience Stores Donate Food to Atlanta Needy," https://www.tsnn.com/news/tyson-foods-national-association-convenience-stores-donate-food-atlanta-needy, October 17, 2016; The Shelby Report, "Tyson Donates Truckload Of Protein, \$168K To Georgia Food Bank," https://www.theshelbyreport. com/2018/04/04/tyson-foods-donates-168k-ga-food-bank/, April 4, 2018.
- ¹¹ Amanda Covaleski, "The 10 Largest Poultry Companies In The United States," https://www.zippia.com/advice/largest-poultry-companies/ July 25, 2022.
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- ¹³ Soloman Iyobosa Omo-Osagie II, Commercial Poultry Production on Maryland's Lower Eastern Shore: The Role of African Americans, 1930s to 1990s (Lanham, MD: University Press of America), Chapter 4.
- ¹⁴ LaGuana Gray, "Arkansas's First Boomtown": El Dorado and the Emergence of the Poultry Processing Industry," The Arkansas Historical Quarterly, vol. 72, No. 3 (Autumn 2013): 211.

- ¹⁵ This information is based on the extensive organizing efforts of United Food and Commercial Workers.
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- ¹⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2017-2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.
- ²⁰ "Fines Appealed after Nitrogen Kills 6 at Georgia Plant," US Official News, August 30, 2021, link.gale.com/apps/doc/ A673803678/STND?u=tel_middleten&sid=bookmark-STND&xid=ad07b564. Accessed November 1, 2021.
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