

WHO IS MARK CURTIS?

Mark Curtis was a packinghouse worker, employed at the Swift plant in Des Moines, Iowa, until his arrest March 4, 1988. He was an active member of United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 431. He attempted to unite packing house workers, including defending the rights of Latin American and Asian immigrants, in the face of an employer drive to slash wages, speed up production, and impose increasingly dangerous working conditions.

VICTIM OF MEATPACKER'S ANTI-LABOR OFFENSIVE

The meatpacking industry has been restructured over the last decade, becoming notorious for transforming packinghouse work into one of the most dangerous jobs in North America. Every year at least one-third of packinghouse workers--58,000 people--can expect to be injured on the job. Millions in fines have been levied by the government against packing companies.

From 1969 through 1983, more than 1,200 packing plants were closed. In the first five years of the 1980s, 24,000 packing house workers were laid off, while speed up and automation increased production by 24%. In some plants, the number of cattle slaughtered per hour was cranked up from 125 to more than 400.

Wages in the industry have been driven down, and a two-tier wage system was introduced everywhere, starting new employees at \$6 an hour or less. One-third of the industry is now non-union.

Thousands of workers from Latin America and Asia have joined U.S.-born workers--Black and white--increasing the potential combativity of packinghouse workers. The employers utilize divisions along race, language, sex, and nationality lines to weaken workers' ability to unite against the bosses.

The restructuring of packing has gone hand in hand with the forced foreclosure of thousands of farmers in the last decade. They were forced off the land by declining land prices, high interest rates, high production costs, and low prices, including the low prices for beef and pork imposed on them by the giant meatpacking monopolies.

Packinghouse workers in the United States and Canada have put up resistance to this offensive. More than 158 strikes occurred between 1980 and 1984. Farmers have also protested farm foreclosures. Curtis promoted solidarity with striking packing workers among his coworkers and through his union, as well as labor backing for fighting farmers.



●Mark Curtis after being beaten by Des Moines police on March 4, 1988

SWIFT

Swift is part of the Monfort division of food industry giant ConAgra. Swift is known for its brutal working conditions. The accident rate exceeds one accident per worker each year. Wages start at less than \$6 per hour.

Some 600 people are employed at the Des Moines plant where Curtis worked. But more than 3,000 workers went through the plant in 1987. Many are forced out because of injuries. Others quit due to the intolerable abuse and dangerous conditions; others are fired.

Mark Curtis worked on the kill floor at Swift. In December 1987, he hurt his back pulling cattle paunches. Management refused repeated requests by Curtis to get medical attention for his injury. He walked off the line to see the company nurse. For this, he was fired. Under pressure from his co-workers, Swift was forced to rehire Curtis, a victory for all Swift workers.

IMMIGRATION POLICE RAID SWIFT

In December 1987, the Swift bosses began secretly collaborating with agents of the Immigration and Naturalization Service to prepare a raid at the Des Moines plant. They combed through all the workers' personnel files and selected 17. On March 1, 1988, the INS and federal marshals swarmed into the plant and dragged 17 workers off the line, 16 from Mexico and one from El Salvador.