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**Sent:** Tuesday, December 29, 2009 7:02 AM  
**To:** ATR-Agricultural Workshops <agriculturalworkshops@usdoj.gov>  
**Subject:** Corporate concentration in the Food System

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December 29, 2009

To the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Justice

RE: Corporate Concentration in the Food System

To the Departments:

How ironic that over a century ago the nation's Beef Trust was at the heart of federal government efforts to break the ever-increasing power of corporate concentration in the U.S. food system. The Departments are to be commended for opening public discussion once again on this critical topic that has been swept into the bins of neglect ever since, at the ever-increasing expense of producers, workers, communities, and consumers across the country.

Workers in the food system are among those it most exploits. This is especially the case in the meatpacking and poultry processing sectors, where working conditions are extraordinarily difficult and dangerous, and where a majority workforce of color seems to be looked upon as expendable. The stories of worker exploitation in this sector are legion and ought to be, in and of themselves, the grist of federal hearings and investigations. The racial structure of this sector alone—and of the entire food system—could keep civil rights attorneys engaged for years.

Corporate concentration in the meat and poultry sectors—essentially now, one sector—has fomented such exploitation. As the industry left the cities for the countryside in the mid-late twentieth century, and as it successfully fractured historic, hard-won, union-scale wage and benefit structures in the 1980s, meatpacking and poultry processing workers were tossed back to the grueling realities of a bygone era, with wages and working conditions to match. As one worker put it so poignantly as he reflected on his job at a hog processing plant operated by one of the country's most recognizable food companies, "When you go into that plant, you leave your humanity at the gate."

It is critical that the voices of workers so deeply, directly, and daily affected by corporate concentration in every sector of the food system be heard by the Departments. While there is virtually no end to the egregious socioeconomic, environmental, producer, community, and food safety impacts of corporate concentration in the food system, the voices that often go unheard as impacts are unraveled and revealed are those whose labor does not afford them time off the lines to tell their stories, to shape direly-needed federal response. The Center for New Community is privileged to work with many whose lives have been so deeply affected by their packing and processing jobs that help feed the nation.

The dramatic increase in corporate concentration in the food system has occurred at the expense of the nation's food security, public health, and economic well-being. Every aspect of such concentration must be examined, exposed, and addressed if the nation is to be well-fed, and if those who feed it are themselves able to live well.

It is absolutely essential that workers at every link in the food chain be heard in that process—particularly if the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Justice live up once again to the integrity of their stated mission on behalf of the people.

Thank you.

The Reverend David L. Ostendorf  
Executive Director

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