

Fewer staff means reduced workplace safety

American workers are tops when it comes to productivity. They work more hours, take less vacation and use fewer sick days than counterparts in Europe. And this just keeps getting harder. In the aftermath of the recession, American productivity per worker has increased almost every month as businesses decide that they can make more profit with fewer workers. In almost every industry, employees are asked to do more with less.

Although this approach is great for the bottom line, it's not so good for employees. In many industries, the work schedule and the pressure to constantly increase output have become a health crisis. For example, unionized steelworkers, when taking a survey about health problems on the job, reported that workloads, hours and increased pressure were the causes of workers' most important health concerns. Although it is usually clear that understaffing leads to these types of problems, businesses continue to reap the rewards of the recovery while overworking their employees.

The pressures seem particularly severe in the meatpacking industry. Some employees have reported reduced employees and increased productivity requirements that lead supervisors to deny requests for bathroom breaks. In another meatpacking plant, a worker reported that his hands hurt so badly the morning after a shift that he could not move them. In a chicken processing plant, 42 percent of workers had carpal tunnel syndrome, according to a federal government survey. And these are not unusual reports; almost all meatpacking workers report taking large amounts of pain reliever just to get through a shift.

The meatpacking industry is not the only type of business

where speedups have left workers unsafe and unhealthy. Oil workers and miners have paid with their lives because of increased productivity requirements. In the hospitals, reduced staffing and more complex patient needs have resulted in severe nurse burnout and increasingly poor patient outcomes. Nurses in a hospital in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, went on strike in the summer of 2013. Their primary concern was not more money but increased staffing.

The result for these nurses has been ulcers, migraines, depression and insomnia. Because there are not enough employees to lift patients properly, nurses and nurses aids constantly experience back pain and disc injuries. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nurses and nurses aides are in the top six occupations for musculoskeletal injuries.

According to [one study](#), businesses in industries mentioned here are reaping the profits of declining workplace safety. Increased productivity is great, but at what cost?