

PRIVATISED MEAT INSPECTION



# A recipe for disaster

CAMPAIGN SUMMARY



## PRIVATISED MEAT INSPECTION: A RECIPE FOR DISASTER

Independent government inspectors working for the Meat Hygiene Service look after the safety of the meat you eat. But now the UK Government and the European Commission want to hand meat inspection to the abattoir industry. They are trying to do this in the name of modernisation, under cover of EC proposals to simplify food hygiene legislation across Europe.<sup>(1)</sup>

UNISON agrees that meat inspection needs to be modernised. But we believe privatisation would be disastrous. Deregulation in the 1980s led to the BSE and e-Coli crises. People have died, and are still dying as a result.

The BSE Inquiry Report acknowledges that deregulation, “may have coloured perceptions of how [BSE] measures ought to be enforced”. UNISON’s meat inspector members are absolutely certain that deregulation has hampered their work. The partial privatisation of UK poultry meat inspection has led to some of the worst abuses of animal welfare and abattoir hygiene anywhere in Europe. These disasters must not happen again. A modernised meat inspection system must remain in the hands of independent government inspectors. The protection of public health should not be privatised.

## WHO WANTS PRIVATISATION?

A powerful coalition of the abattoir industry, the Food Standards Agency, the European Commission and Codex Alimentarius, the food safety committee of the World Trade Organisation, are pushing for the privatisation of meat inspection. So far their deliberations have been held largely behind closed doors, with public debate on their plans virtually impossible. British consumers and the UK parliament are being effectively by-passed. UNISON wants a proper public debate on this vital issue and this is why we are running this campaign. Perhaps if we had had this debate in the 1980’s the BSE disaster might not have happened. It must not be allowed to happen again!

# WHY DO THE PRIVATISERS WANT TO DEREGULATE MEAT INSPECTION?

The UK abattoir industry wants it because it will cut costs and boost profits.

The Food Standards Agency wants it because it has inherited the Ministry of Agriculture's explicit support for the privatisation of meat inspection. <sup>(2)</sup>

The European Commission wants it because it supports global trade liberalisation and is under pressure from powerful commercial interests on Codex Alimentarius, from the USA and Australia and Europe. They want to deregulate European meat inspection to bring it into line with the US and Australian models which are being privatised. At the moment, the EC will only allow imports of meat inspected by independent government inspectors.

If you think these are poor, and even dangerous reasons to tamper with the UK's independent meat inspection system you would be right. That is why UNISON is arguing that meat inspection should be modernised but not privatised.



## WHAT THE PUBLIC THINKS

MORI research carried out for UNISON in November 2000 shows that 77% of the British public oppose the privatisation of meat inspection. 59% also indicated that they would feel less confident that meat was safe to eat if inspection were privatised. The full MORI results are available in UNISON's detailed campaign guide.

## HOW COULD PRIVATISATION HAPPEN?

The EC proposals to simplify European food hygiene legislation suggest that the current meat inspection system

should be modernised by introducing the Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP) system.

It is a simple system. It would require the abattoir owner to draw up a paper procedure identifying the risks in meat production and how to reduce or eliminate them.



The privatisers believe that once the HACCP paper system is in place, government inspectors should be withdrawn from abattoirs to be replaced by company employees. The abattoir's paperwork would only be checked from time to time by Government audit. There would be no role for continuous independent meat inspection, which currently protects public health.

## WHAT IS WRONG WITH HACCP?

HACCP is an industry process control system, not a system of meat inspection. HACCP should be an enhancement, not a replacement, for the current inspection system.

HACCP is not science based. It is conceptually simple. It is a paper system by which abattoirs can identify points where control is critical for food safety.

There is no scientific evidence that HACCP will produce safer meat than we have available today.

The claims for HACCP-based quality assurance fool the consumer into thinking such systems are fail-safe and foolproof when they are neither.

HACCP provides a convenient vehicle for the privatising agenda, because as a paper-only system it lends itself to periodic audit, rather than the current constant government supervision.

Although HACCP is strongly supported by governments in the US, Australia, EC and UK, there is increasing evidence

from Australia and the US that it does not work in abattoirs from which independent inspectors have been withdrawn.

Meat-related food-borne illness has been steadily increasing in Australia since domestic meat inspection was changed to a privatised HACCP system in 1994.

In June 2000 the US Department of Agriculture's Inspector General published a report that strongly criticises HACCP and recommends that government inspection be stepped up again in US abattoirs.

In May 2000 the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia ruled that HACCP was unlawful in the US because it contravened the statutory requirement for independent carcass inspection. If the US rejects food inspected by company employees why should EU citizens accept anything less?

The Australian Labour Party has endorsed the "importance of independent government employed meat inspectors" in a unanimously supported motion at its 2000 party conference.

UNISON wants to see HACCP introduced as part of a modernised meat inspection service, overseen by independent government inspection.

## UNISON'S MODERNISATION PLAN FOR MEAT INSPECTION.

Our members work as meat inspectors. They know the pitfalls of the current system, and they know only too well the abuses of the system. Reforming the system must not result in privatisation. The meat industry is simply not equipped to regulate itself. Self-regulation inevitably leads to a conflict between safety and profit, as the rail industry has tragically demonstrated. The BSE and e-Coli crises show what can happen if independent inspection is weakened by government, as happened before 1996. That is why UNISON is calling for meat inspection to be modernised but not privatised.

UNISON has therefore developed a ten point plan, with our members, for a modernised, but independent meat inspection service for the UK and Europe.

1. A strong independent government inspection system is vital. Its over-riding aim has to be the safety of the consumer. The disastrous privatisation of UK poultry meat inspection should be reversed.

2. Modernisation must be driven firstly by the consumer interest, with the interests of business and government coming second. It must:

- rely upon properly researched consumer expectations of the conditions under which their meat is produced, and the way in which that meat is inspected as fit for human consumption.
- be based on an open and transparent scientific assessment of the risks to consumers in meat production.
- relate to the single objective of consumer safety, rather than reducing the cost burden of inspection to industry or the Treasury.

3. Modernisation must be based on a scientific study to establish appropriate staffing levels for the eventual inspection regime.

4. Modernisation must not just be about delivering microbiological safety; it must also guarantee the wholesomeness of the product. "Wholesome" means:

- Natural, with no artificial end-process treatments, such as sterilisation or irradiation, which consumers have rejected.
- Meat free from abnormal or pathological lesions
- Meat free from parasites
- Meat produced under humane conditions.

5. Animal welfare must be paramount and guaranteed in any new system.

6. Modernisation should be the subject of proper parliamentary and public debate.

7. Meat inspectors should be allowed to train up to perform an enhanced role in meat inspection, which would save the meat industry millions each year in costs.
8. Independent meat inspection should move 'upstream' to ensure that welfare standards and animal health are properly scrutinised on the farm. This is not happening at present and puts consumers in danger.
9. The FSA should set up an effective whistleblowing system to allow meat inspectors and company employees to report abuses of the system without the fear of victimisation.
10. Modernisation must take into account the special needs of the low/medium throughput abattoirs and not disadvantage them relative to large agro-business.

## OUR CAMPAIGN

UNISON will be campaigning vigorously to get our action plan, and the dangers of privatisation, raised in parliament and with key opinion formers. If you want to support our campaign or want further details visit UNISON's website at [www.unison.org.uk](http://www.unison.org.uk) (click on 'Campaigns and Policy Areas') or contact Ben Priestley, National Officer, UNISON, 1 Mabledon Place, London WC1H 9AJ. Telephone 0207 388 2366.

A more detailed campaign guide is available on request.



## NOTES:

(1) European Commission proposals for the consolidation and simplification of EU Food Hygiene Directives – July 2000 (2000/0178, 0179, 0180, 0182)

(2) "Review of Regulatory Burdens": Response by the Government to the Report by the Meat Industry Red Tape Working Group – February 2000.

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