“if We Can Change the White House
WE CAN CHANGE
THE HOG HOUSE”

The SAGA of the
SMITHFIELD WORKERS
in TAR HEEL, NC
On December 2008 the United Food and Commercial Workers Union won one of the largest union elections in decades at the Smithfield Foods pig slaughter plant in Tar Heel, NC. The massive 5000-worker plant is the largest in the world, killing 32,000 pigs a day and more than 8 million a year.

In 1994 and 1997 workers at the plant tried to win union representation, but in both cases Smithfield was found by the National Labor Relations Board to have cheated the workers out of a fair election.

In 2006, after years of fruitless litigation, the UFCW launched the national Justice@Smithfield Campaign Under the slogan “Packaged with Abuse” workers took the stories of widespread health and safety abuse and disrespect in the plant to communities across the country. Meanwhile, inside the plant Smithfield workers continued to stand up for their rights, and their courage inspired a national movement of supporters and gained widespread media coverage. In October 2007 Smithfield sued the UFCW for extortion under the notorious RICO Act, a law
designed to pursue the Mafia. In October 2008, hours before the RICO case was to go to trial, Smithfield dropped the charges and agreed to a set of rules that could allow for a fair election. The Tar Heel workers won the election on December 11th and joy broke out for miles around. In July 2009 Smithfield workers ratified their first contract and formed their own Local Union organization.

This poem tells the story from the inside of the campaign.

—Gene Bruskin

Gene was the Director of the Justice@Smithfield Campaign for the UFCW from 2006 through 2008. He has 30 years of experience in the labor movement as a rank and file union leader, organizer and campaigner. He can be reached at genebruskin@gmail.com
There was a plant
Where they said
You can’t!
So don’t rave and rant
No matter how you feel
It’s no big deal
Cause we’re Smithfield
And we own Tar Heel

Since ’92
When the plant was new
CEO Luter and crew
Said The hell with you
UFCW too
Pigs are our deal
From the squeal to the meal

When the plant was complete
One million square feet
The biggest on earth
Unimaginable girth
A daily drill
Of a 32,000 hog kill
Lines racing
Workers facing
Ungodly pacing
One motion every few seconds
Designed for body wreckin’
You could be removed
For missing one move
In this relentless groove
’Cause, with no tail and no snout
You don’t really count

The plant is filled with
Gruesome squeals
Of dying pigs becoming a meal
With workers doing the whole deal
There are Rib and loin pullers
Gutters and splitters
Head droppers
Neck droppers, neck breakers
Pituitary pullers
Tattooers
Gas chambers
Whizard knives, split saws,
Dehair shavers
Butt lines, Loin lines
The Final rail and the Fat O meter
The wet kill and the dry kill
Eight million hogs a year
More than workers’ bodies can bear
Workers trampled by 300 pound hogs
Fingers caught in machine cogs
Wrist destroyed
So they can’t lift baby boys
Legs in pain
From standing strain
Shoulders separated
Backs wrecked
Keeping pigs in check
Flirting daily with disaster
To meet the harsh terms
Of an unforgiving master

So the workers organized
Wanting to unionize
To save their lives
Hoping to survive
The work induced
Physical abuse
The lack of respect
From a company unchecked
Supervisors shouting
Humiliating
Never conciliating
No humanity
No dignity
Just the sanctity
Of productivity
In ’94 UFCW
Went on an organizing spree
Hoping to hold a vote
That was fair and free
In came the government’s NRLB
But the workers were defeated
When the company cheated
And the NLRB conceded
Another election was needed

Then CEO Luter’s gang
Their apologies sang
Saying if they vote again
We promise then
To play it cool
And follow all the rules

When the ’97 election neared
As the workers’ had feared
Smithfield cheated and lied
Though the union tried
The company threatened and fired
Harassed and spied
And when the vote finally came
The company put on their full court game
Sheriffs appeared in riot gear
Standing there
As workers arrived at work
While the company smirked
At the vote count that ill-fated night
The company turned out the lights
Started fist fights
With appalling vigor
Shouted *Get the niggers!*
As the violence crested
They had workers arrested

With workers’ hopes in tears
The union shifted gears
Totally outraged,
They got the Labor Board engaged
Charges were filed
Up the legal work piled
Nine years went by
With teams of lawyers
From the unrelenting employer
Using every trick
So the charges wouldn’t stick

Then in 2006
The Court of Appeals
Ruled with its seal
But the penalty
Was quite unreal
Though the company was found
Guilty all around
The remedy
Had a whimpering sound
The company was merely bound to
“Post the findings on the wall
And hold yet another election
For one and all”

Smithfield smiled
Taking note
Loudly declared
Let’s vote
Ignoring the blatant hypocrisy
They publicly championed democracy
Let every worker
From the floor to the pallet
Promptly cast another Secret Ballot

The Union
Took another tack
Abandoning the narrow
Legal track
Rejecting voting under terror
As close to insane
Vowing to campaign
Until Smithfield yields
To a level playing field

The Union said, hey lets go
Tell the workers’ stories of woe
In Boston, New York and Chicago
Clear across the nation
To Smithfield’s consternation,
Wherever Smithfield’s products were sold
Workers stories were being told!
“Smithfield Pork is packaged with abuse”
And Smithfield had no good excuse

People rallied nationwide
Demanding justice by the workers’ side
Churches, unions and groups for civil rights
Students and consumers joined the fight
They marched, picketed, emailed, phoned
Passed resolutions, descended on Supermarkets
Refused to yield
Demanding “Justice@Smithfield”

The media picked up the story
The business side
And the tales so gory
Even Paula Deen
Smithfield’s celebrity cooking queen
Couldn’t be seen
Without looking mean
Because she defended Smithfield’s routine
Even on the TV screen
As Smithfield workers came to Paula’s scenes
Demanding to be seen by the cooking dean

In August 2007
The campaign began to leaven
A thousand marched in Williamsburg
Demanding that the workers be heard
By the Smithfield’s Board
That was comfortably sequestered
Plotting ample returns
For wealthy investors
But serious trouble
Burst the meeting’s quiet bubble
Workers and ministers
Demand admission
Presenting thousands of workers petitions
While CEO Luter leered and sneered
The crowds outside chanted and cheered
And the company decided to shift gears

By October ’07
A new die was cast
Smithfield, tired
Of coming in last
Filed a massive RICO suit
Backed by lawyers and lots of loot
A move that seemed extreme and arcane
But Smithfield hoped to halt the Campaign
With charges wildly disproportionate
Claiming the union was extortionate
And feeling quite fortunate
With a company-friendly judge
But the UFCW didn’t budge

While the wheels of injustice
Continued to turn
And the public campaign
Continue to churn
The workers in the plant
Continued to learn
To wage their fight
For their union rights

On May 1st, ’06
Latinos had closed the plant
Marching with
Workers from across the land
Standing and demanding
Without profanity
Simple fairness and humanity

Then in October of ’06
Smithfield went the workers one better
Issuing a thousand Social Security No-Match letters
But immigrant workers
Said NO You Can’t
We’ve put too many years in this plant
Don’t treat us this way
We are walking out today

After two days the company caved
And the letters were waved
And the workers returned
With a victory well earned

By January ’07
The No-Match letters were back
Plus, ICE raided the plant
In a daylight attack
And Latino workers
Were forced to flee
To the right wing’s glee
As the anti-immigrant wave
Rose from sea to sea

When the Latino workers were pushed out the door
The company professed deep love for
These *hard working producers*
But, being equal opportunity abusers
They proved fully adroit
At finding more Blacks to exploit

By 2008
The RICO suit raging
Workers in the plant
Began engaging
At increasing levels
The harassing devils
They faced every day
Who gave them no say
And not enough pay
And respected them
No way
Challenging all servility
With growing visibility
In January on MLK
The workers finally got their way
Smithfield yielded
After two years of protests that
The workers fielded
Giving them King’s holiday paid
[Clearly a company afraid
Of losing the war for hearts and minds
And fearing that inside would completely unwind]

Throughout the year the leaders grew
In numbers and in boldness too
Stopping work,
Marching to HR with petitions
Creating suspicions
That they might shut it all down
And the company frowned
As workers went to town
Declaring on their helmets
That Union Time
Had arrived
And they wanted an end
To the company’s jive
Basta!

Workers strategized more and more
At the nearby Mexican Store
Leaders created the plan
For liberating territory in the plant
Defying the notion that they can’t
Holding large lunchtime meetings in break room
and hallways
Always
Wearing Justice@Smithfield T shirts
Talking dirt about company abuse
Vowing to refuse
To be intimidated

Handing out *Hogs Gone Wild*
The workers newsletter brainchild
Chanting and ranting about injustice
Making it clear
There was nothing to fear
That it was time
To have a union there

After the rain comes the sun
The workers prepared for the Big One
*Si Se Puede!*

As the RICO court
Was to open its doors
The company decided not to explore
Its gory story
With a federal jury
Maybe afraid
That if their case wasn’t made
And it didn’t work
They would look like jerks
If the jury found
That they were clowns
Of infamous renown
A company unwelcome
In Washington Town
With Obama around

Smithfield dropped the case
[Some think they ducked]
An election deal was struck
Letting the UFCW in the plant
With a Monitor who could say
That the company can’t
Lie and cheat
Fire and beat
And create the ’97 heat
The deal tied their hands.
Their legal strategy in shambles
Smithfield took the gamble

On the union’s side
Was the Obama tide
His NC win
Meant that Change was in
And that drove that theme
As the workers proclaimed
If we can change the white house
we can Change the hog house
Daily at 4AM
There were 30 of them
With leaflets that say
Change We Can Believe In
Go for hope not fear
Union Time is here
*Si Se Puede*

Meanwhile
Smithfield played on ignorance and fear
Saying hey, Chef Jeff and Hershel Walker are here
Passing out thousands of Vote No shirts
That did nothing to mend the workers hurts
Spreading rumors of plants closing
Wages plunging
Latinos threatened
Company asking for another chance
To which workers replied with
Union chants
*Queremos Union*

When word came
With the final score of the game
“Workers win, Smithfield shamed”
Workers cried
Danced in the cafeteria
There was near hysteria
Organizers shouting
Company pouting
For 16 years the company had lied
And tried
To claim
That they spoke in the workers’ name
That workers wanted things to stay the same

But hope springs eternal
In the human soul
The workers reached their hard fought goal
And as the next day’s dawn was near
Down in Tar Heel
You could hear
The workers chant become a cheer
*We changed the Hog House*
*We changed the Hog House*
*We changed the Hog House!*

—Gene Bruskin
January, 2009