

Of COVID-19 and Chickens: The Ethics of One Workplace Safety Policy Early in the Pandemic

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Abstract. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic created considerable challenges for the food supply chain. One of the industries hardest hit was the agricultural and agri-foods industry. This industry has long faced worker shortages and regularly relied on temporary foreign workers. In this case, Roosters, a chicken processing and production company in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, had just come off a very costly 12-day closure following a COVID-19 exposure risk in two of its processing plants. With the company back in operation a new safety policy has been implemented to limit future virus exposure and shutdown risks. The policy, however, targets a small group of temporary foreign workers, one of whom is challenging the lengths the company can go in the name of protecting employees from the virus and the company from losses due to closure.

Keywords: agriculture, agri-food industry, temporary foreign worker, closed work permit, poultry, food supply chain, co-habiting, human resource policy.

In the early morning darkness Rashida put on the kettle and climbed back in bed to scroll through Instagram. Her phone chimed. A co-worker told her to check her email. There was a message from their employer stating a new workplace policy that required all co-habiting employees to work in the same building to limit the spread of COVID-19. Rashida's heart quickened. She and her husband did very different jobs in different buildings for a local chicken producer and processor, Roosters, so this policy would require one of them to change jobs, co-workers, and areas. This concerned Rashida. She doesn't like working with chickens, but it is a possible pathway to immigration. She and her husband are temporary foreign workers in Canada and are restricted to employment with Roosters. She does not know what this policy will mean for them but given their limited employment options she is worried.

Roosters Poultry Processing Ltd. ("Roosters") is a British Columbia (BC), Canada based wholesaler and retailer of poultry and poultry products across North

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America. Roosters is the largest of three chicken processing businesses in the Metro Vancouver Regional District (“MVRD”) in BC. The company has over 600 employees between its two poultry processing plants in Maple Ridge, BC. Most of the employees are general labourers involved in cleaning, trimming, cutting, packaging, and shipping chickens. Roosters also has three company-owned chicken hatcheries located a short distance from the processing plants. The hatcheries, together, employ 105 employees who are mostly general labourers involved in the sorting and placement of fertile eggs in incubators, transferring eggs from incubators to hatching, separating chicks from their eggs, culling chicks, and cleaning and setting up equipment.

Among Roosters’ employees are 140 temporary foreign workers. They are in Canada on an Employer-specific Work Permit (“EWP”) tying their employment to Roosters. Employees with EWPs were told by Roosters that if they “work out” during the two-year EWP period, they will be offered permanent employment with Roosters and the company will also nominate them for permanent residency in BC under the Provincial Nominee Program (“BC PNP”).¹ This possibility allows those with an EWP a pathway to obtaining permanent residency in Canada and an opportunity to bring their loved ones to live with them. Alternatively, if things do not work out, Roosters has no obligation to employees on an EWP but has agreed to provide them with a one-way ticket back to their country of origin. A constant fear among temporary foreign workers is that if they complain or fail to succeed in their roles, they will be sent home.

Roosters contracts with independent egg farmers (“egg farmers”) who supply Roosters with broiler hatching eggs which are fertilized eggs that eventually hatch to produce a chicken. Broiler eggs are placed into special incubators at Roosters’ hatcheries for 21 days, after which they hatch into broiler chicks. The chicks are delivered by Roosters to chicken farmers (“chicken farmers”) the same day they hatch to mature in “grow-out houses.” Once they are fully grown, Roosters collects the chickens from the chicken farmers and transports them to its processing plants where it processes them into a full range of chicken products. The entire cycle from placing of the fertilized eggs in incubators to slaughtering them at processing plants takes about 10 weeks.

Chicken is the most consumed meat product in all North America. The US set a record for chicken consumption in 2020 with Americans consuming over 95lbs per person.² Canadians consumed 34.4kg/76lbs of chicken per person in the same

1. Temporary foreign workers in the food production industry are classified as “entry level or semi-skilled workers”. Under the BC PNP such workers need to demonstrate 9 months to two years of full-time continuous employment, but sponsoring employers typically request a longer employment commitment as a condition of nominating the employee for permanent residency. Government of British Columbia (2023, January 23), Welcome BC: About the BC provincial nominee program. <https://www.welcomebc.ca/Immigrate-to-B-C/About-The-BC-PNP>; Government of Canada (2022, April 13), You need a work permit. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/work-canada/permit/temporary/need-permit/lmia.html>