

Mounting protests in Canada's construction industry over lack of safety measures to counter COVID-19

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Worry and anger over the lack of safety measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 on building sites has prompted a growing number of construction worker protests across Canada. This is part of a mounting international wave of walkouts, as workers challenge the corporate bosses' insistence that workers' health and safety should be jeopardized to ensure investor profit.

Building workers in Ontario—who comprise one-third of Canada's construction industry workforce—are demanding an industry-wide shutdown after Doug Ford, the province's right-wing populist premier, exempted construction from the shutdown of all non-essential workplaces and industries he ordered as of midnight March 24.

An online petition was subsequently circulated by Christopher Morgan, a construction worker from Caledon, Ontario, that states, "There is no need to hurry along these projects while risking our own families and ourselves." The petition, which has gained almost 50,000 signatures, demands that Ford shut down all construction sites in the province.

Comments from other Ontario construction workers indicate that they would be willing to conduct essential work, provided they are given the necessary protection. "If it's a hospital, you know, and medical facilities that we desperately need, fine. I'm all for it," Antonio Cruz told CBC. "But residential (construction), especially residential, it makes no sense."

Widespread objections to unsafe working conditions on job sites compelled the Ontario Construction Consortium (OCC), a union-backed corporatist lobby group, to issue a public statement urging the provincial government to suspend work on construction sites across Ontario for 14 days. The statement said the "minimum standards" laid out by the province's new sanitation rules "simply do not exist on most of our job sites."

The Carpenter's District Council of Ontario and the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America

similarly announced that construction workers in the province "should not be expected to work on job sites where the basic safety requirements for COVID-19 are not being met."

In the face of this mounting criticism, Ford was forced to announce Wednesday that his government is "adjusting" the list of businesses that are deemed "essential services" and thereby exempt from his lockdown order. The initial list of so-called essential services named 74 types of businesses, including construction and large swathes of manufacturing.

Ford has also made the absurd claim that there are now dozens of labour inspectors on the ground who "will not hesitate" to shut down construction work sites that are not following the new emergency guidelines. This is rich coming from a government that for the past two years has driven down wages and gutted worker rights and protections.

On March 24 work was halted on a new light-rail network (REM) being built in Montreal after more than a hundred construction workers refused to work because of the lack of measures to stop the spread of the coronavirus. The principal contractor, CDPQ Infra, was forced to shut down operations until April 14.

That same day, Quebec's largest construction unions, FTQ-Construction and the Conseil provincial du Québec des métiers de la construction (International), wrote a panicked letter to Premier Francois Legault requesting that he "intervene immediately" to protect the workforce. "It is currently impossible to meet basic health standards on the vast majority of construction sites in Quebec," FTQ-Construction Executive-Director Éric Boisjoly said in a statement. "In this context, it is irresponsible to continue the work."

Legault initially denied that building workers were at risk of exposure to COVID-19, peddling the lie that workers are not together in confined spaces on a large scale, and insisting that construction, one of the province's major industries, could "continue to function despite the crisis." But increased

worker protests and demands for sanitation measures to be taken have compelled his government to suspend all construction activity except for emergency or security services until April 13.

In British Columbia, despite emergency rules around social distancing and sanitation and a ban on gatherings of more than 50 people, construction sites continue to operate at full tilt. The BC Building Trades Council—which represents 25 unions—has declared that workers are “pleading for help” and that “this is urgent.” The warning came after rank and file workers raised a slew of concerns, including inadequate access to washroom facilities, running water, soap and hand sanitizer, and after several workers showed up for work visibly sick.

A worker who emailed local news website BIV reported that there were at least 50 people using four washrooms on his job site located near the city of Vancouver, and he has yet to see them cleaned on a daily basis. Another wrote, “well over 200 people sharing this one water hose. ... No hot water. No hand sanitizer, and five to six bathrooms for the whole site. The fact no one is shutting these sites down right now is unreal...”

British Columbia’s industrial construction projects are also exempt from the province’s new emergency rules. The Site C dam is not considered a “high-risk environment” by provincial officials and is continuing operations with 1,000 workers housed in a work camp. LNG Canada has apparently scaled back operations on its mammoth \$40 billion project to build a natural gas export facility in Kitimat, but has retained two-thirds of its workforce, some 1,500 workers. They are also housed in a work camp.

The determination of the construction industry to stay operational at all costs and the government’s refusal to enforce even basic protections against the spread of COVID-19 underscores the ruling class’ criminal indifference to the lives of workers and their families. Any decision on the part of the construction companies to slow or suspend operations is due to contractual obligations and logistical concerns such as supply-chain interruptions, or because workers have taken matters into their own hands by staging protests or calling in sick.

In Alberta, despite well over 900 confirmed COVID-19 cases, the Alberta Construction Association (ACA) is vowing to keep the “economic engine going.” Recently, Alberta’s United Conservative Party premier, Jason Kenney, announced that thousands of workers will continue working on the \$12.6 billion Trans Mountain pipeline project, despite evidence of a lack of social distancing protocols being enforced.

For their part, the construction trade unions masquerade as guardians of workers’ health and safety, but in reality

function as cheap labour contractors for big business, and have facilitated the decades-long decline in real wages and erosion of workers’ rights and safety protections. Their empty appeals to government to enforce even modest safeguards against the spread of COVID-19 are a cynical and panicked response to the independent initiative taken by workers.

The union bureaucracy’s cozy relationship with big business and their political representatives is exemplified by Kenney’s recent appointment of the former COO of Canada’s Building Trades Union (CBTU), Bob Blakely, to his advisory panel on the province’s “economic recovery” plan. Included on the panel, along with various corporate executives, is former Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, whose hard-right government imposed years of brutal austerity, dramatically expanded the power of the state to spy on its citizens, and, through a spate of back-to-work laws, all but abolished the legal right to strike.

As it is, the construction industry represents almost 20 percent of all precarious work. Poverty wages, lack of benefits, and virtually no regulation or worker training explains why the industry suffers from acute shortages and relies on an expanding base of recent immigrants and undocumented workers, who are more vulnerable to employer exploitation. A further decline in working conditions is expected, as indicated by Benjamin Tal, chief deputy economist at corporate banking giant, CIBC, who told *Daily Commercial News*, “The labour shortage will be with us for a while. We have to build smarter, be more creative and find a way to limit construction costs.”

The militant walkouts and protests by Canadian construction workers are part of an international upsurge of working class opposition to the criminal indifference of the ruling elites to workers’ health and safety amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Workers’ anger has erupted in strikes organized outside of the unions, which have taken place throughout the world, including autoworkers in North America, Amazon workers in France, metal workers in Italy, and postal workers in the UK.



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