

Canadian workers at Cargill meatpacking plant forced back to work despite 935 infections

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Hundreds of workers at the giant Cargill meatpacking plant in High River, Alberta fearfully returned to their jobs Monday morning after attempts to keep the company from re-opening in the wake of a massive coronavirus outbreak were rejected by provincial officials.

In the largest single localized outbreak in North America, 935 of the plant's 2,000 workers have already been infected by the highly contagious and potentially lethal COVID-19 virus. Six hundred close contacts of the meatpackers have also tested positive. To date, one worker, Vietnamese immigrant Hiep Bui, has died from the illness, as well as one close contact. Seven workers have been hospitalized with 5 in intensive care.

Nonetheless, over the weekend, Cargill issued a statement instructing all "healthy and eligible" workers to report for work in the two-shift operation.

In a survey of its membership, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) reported that 85 percent were afraid to return to the plant. About eighty percent of Cargill production employees are low-wage immigrant workers from the Philippines, Vietnam and China, many of whom are on Temporary Foreign Worker visas. The workers not only fear possible infection, they also worry that refusing company directives could endanger their work status in the country.

Despite these fears, the UFCW has refused to organize any job action to stop Cargill's return to work order. Local union president Thomas Hesse has been outspoken on the company's refusal to incorporate the union's safety proposals into its back-to-work protocols. "It's ridiculous that hundreds of workers can be required to pour into the plant to kill 4,000 to 5,000

cattle a day, while if you climb on the monkey bars in your local park you're going to get a ticket," he said.

Although Cargill has installed plexiglass separations for line workers, the packers work elbow to elbow and face to face with their colleagues. Noise on the shop floor requires close communication with supervisors and fellow workers. Face masks quickly become useless in the wet, humid environment. With so many meatpackers off work, close-quarter training in the midst of the fast-paced environment has fostered unsafe practices.

But with the union's attempts to convince provincial officials to keep the plant closed until further safety measures are put in place falling on deaf ears, Hesse was keen to tell reporters that no work stoppages would be organized. "We are looking at legal options. We are not asking for a work stoppage. A work stoppage would not be legal," he said.

Left to fend for themselves, at least some workers, judging from traffic into the plant Monday morning, chose absenteeism in response to the threat of infection.

The UFCW's reliance on the labour and health and safety boards of Alberta—overseen by the pro-big business, hard-right United Conservative Party government of Jason Kenney—is a flagrant abdication of its responsibility to protect the well-being of the vulnerable Cargill workers. The union bureaucrats are more concerned with reassuring employers and the government that they are responsible partners, who will enforce capitalist laws and contracts, than in fighting for the very lives of the workers they purport to represent.

The Alberta authorities' role in forcing the Cargill workers back on the job, to follow the dictates of the

same managers who ignored their earlier complaints about the lack of anti-COVID-19 safety measures, is scandalous. But it is far from exceptional.

A recent report from Ontario showed that of 200 COVID-19 related work-refusals protesting unsafe conditions, not one resulted in a stop work-order being issued by provincial inspectors. When work was stopped at Fiat-Chrysler's Windsor Assembly plant in early March, it was the result of spontaneous work-refusal "walk-offs" by rank-and-file autoworkers.

The events that have transpired at the Cargill facility are a case study in the drive by corporations across the globe, backed by governments of all political stripes, to place profit over human lives.

The High River plant packs 40 percent of all Canadian beef products each day. Cargill is the largest privately owned company in the United States with \$115 billion in annual revenues as reported in 2018 filings. The Cargill family is listed as the fourth wealthiest family in the United States.

After the COVID-19 pandemic was declared in March, no preventative inspection of the Cargill plant was undertaken by health or labour authorities even after workers began to fall sick. When an inspection was finally done on April 15, the assigned official did not even enter the main part of the shop floor, scandalously preferring instead to stay outside the facility and inspect it via a FaceTime app. The facility was given a clean bill of health.

However, with more workers falling ill and Hiep Bui succumbing to COVID-19 on April 19, three days after she had last worked at the plant, the facility was idled for two weeks on April 20.

COVID-19 has quickly re-emerged in several US meatpacking plants that have had re-openings similar to that now occurring at Cargill's High River plant, because the work process is designed to squeeze the last ounce of productivity out of workers at the expense of their health, their safety and now, their very existence.



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