

Ten Canadian airport taxi drivers die from COVID-19

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Ten taxi and limousine drivers servicing Toronto's Pearson International Airport have died from COVID-19. According to the Airport Taxi Association, which represents 700 Pearson Airport drivers, six of the dead had confirmed COVID-19 diagnoses, while the other four likely succumbed to the virus.

The high death toll among the generally low-paid taxi drivers underscores the grave threat all workers face from the reckless, premature back-to-work drive being mounted by Ontario's Tory government, with the support of Canada's Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government.

The hundreds of thousands of workers that are to be forced back to their jobs in coming weeks amid the COVID-19 pandemic will face the same high risk of infection as the taxi drivers, many of whom have been compelled to continue working throughout the lockdown in order to make ends meet.

Karam Singh Punian, 59, worked as a driver for Aerofleet, an airport limo and taxi company, until he succumbed to the novel coronavirus last Monday. Punian first fell ill in late March and, after being diagnosed, self-quarantined. However, his symptoms worsened and he had to be hospitalized at Toronto General Hospital and put on a ventilator. He never recovered. Punian leaves behind his wife, two sons, a niece whom he cared for, and a granddaughter.

On May 1, Akashdip Grewal, who also worked for Aerofleet, passed away at Toronto General Hospital.

"If precautionary measures had been taken on time," ATA President Rajinder Oujla told the *Toronto Star*, these deaths "might not have happened."

The Greater Toronto Airport Authority, which is responsible for licensing passenger pickup service at the airport, recently introduced new measures to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus. These include

signage to encourage social distancing, more frequent sanitizing and disinfection of vehicles between trips, and more regular cleaning of high traffic areas of the airport.

Lacking confidence in the effectiveness of these measures, drivers who can afford to stay home are choosing to do so. An Aerofleet dispatcher told the *Toronto Star* last week that only two out of its 115 cars were currently servicing Pearson Airport. This low figure also reflects the impact of dramatically decreased air travel.

While the airport authority claims that it has offered to help drivers get personal protective equipment (PPE), such as N-95 masks, and that it has encouraged drivers to make safety changes to their vehicles, it has refused to pay for these and other elementary safety precautions.

Drivers are exposed to considerable risk, given that they transport passengers arriving from all over the world in the enclosed space of a vehicle. In addition to better PPE, drivers are pushing for a ban on passengers sitting in the front seat.

Airport pickup and dropoff drivers are not the only Toronto-area taxi drivers to have been exposed to the virus. Beck Taxi has reportedly seen three of its drivers test positive, however none has required hospitalization.

Taxi and driving service workers are typically low paid, and often employed under precarious, temporary arrangements. Competition between rideshare apps and taxi services is fierce and the margins by which workers cover their car payments, insurance, fuel and licensing fees are narrow. At the best of times, they often have little left over to cover rent, food or savings. In order to get enough work, drivers often work long hours and need to live close to urban centres, like

Toronto, where the cost of living is extremely high.

Drivers are receiving no support from their employers. A full-time Uber driver told blogTO that his income plunged from an average of \$6,000 per month to just \$147 per week due to the coronavirus pandemic. He was forced to stop driving after Uber failed to supply disinfectant that had been promised to clean vehicles. “(Uber) is not doing anything to support their full-time drivers financially,” added the worker.

The pandemic has also taken a deadly toll on other groups of transport workers. As of April 20, 23 Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) employees had tested positive for COVID-19. In mid-April, dozens of TTC bus drivers stopped work for several hours to demand face masks and other personal protective equipment from the employer. In London, England, at least 30 transit workers have died, while New York has recorded over 80 deaths.

The utter failure of politicians at all levels and of the corporatist trade unions to secure basic safety measures and financial support for transport workers is an expression of the capitalist elite’s policy of malign neglect toward the entire working class amid the coronavirus pandemic.

It underscores the urgency of taxi drivers organizing independent action committees with their colleagues in other transport sectors to enforce measures to make workplaces safe and protect workers and their families from financial ruin. These measures must include the payment of full wages to everyone who cannot work due to the virus, a vast expansion of testing and contact-tracing to limit the spread of COVID-19, the shutting down of all non-essential business activity, and the provision of masks and other PPE to transport workers who are required to offer lifeline services to hospitals and other essential facilities.

The resources to implement such a program are available in abundance. Toronto Pearson Airport, where the 10 drivers who lost their lives worked, recently boasted of commercial revenue growth of 11.3 percent, taking total revenue in 2018 to \$1.4 billion. “Toronto Pearson’s fastest-growing source of income continues to be commercial revenues from non-aeronautical sources such as parking and ground transportation fees, retail and dining concessions, and rent paid by airlines for check-in counters and kiosks,” enthused the airport in a press release directed to investors.

Uber, meanwhile, reached a market capitalization of over \$69 billion in February as banks and investors cashed in on a rise in the company’s value of \$6 billion in just one day.

The Trudeau Liberal government’s response to the coronavirus crisis has been to protect the vast fortunes of the capitalist elite by funnelling hundreds of billions of dollars to the banks and financial markets, while placing workers on ration-style, makeshift emergency relief. A Toronto taxi driver whose wages have disappeared as a result of the lockdown can at most receive \$2,000 per month under the federal government’s taxable Canada Emergency Response Benefit. This is not even enough to cover the average rent on a one-bedroom apartment in Canada’s largest city, never mind food, utilities and car insurance.

The struggle of transit workers and the entire working class, for basic measures to combat the health, social and financial impact of the pandemic is thus inseparable from the fight against the capitalist profit system. The vast wealth of the banks and major corporations must be expropriated and used to protect the health and wellbeing of working people and their families, through the bringing to power of a workers’ government committed to socialist policies.



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