

Canadian farm and industrial worksites become new coronavirus hotspots

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The reckless back-to-work drive across Canada, greenlighted by the federal Liberal government and spearheaded by the hard-right provincial governments of Ontario, Quebec and Alberta, is already producing new outbreaks of the potentially deadly coronavirus. The precipitous re-opening of manufacturing operations, warehouses and retail centers without any consideration for the health and safety of workers, combined with the seasonal increase in agricultural activity, have turned many worksites across Ontario into COVID-19 hotspots.

In Norfolk County, near the shores of Lake Erie, 125 migrant workers out of a 216-strong workforce at Scotlynn Farms have tested positive for COVID-19. At the time of this writing, seven have been hospitalized, with two in intensive care. The workers, who mostly hail from Mexico, passed the 14-day quarantine period after arriving in the country and worked another 11 days in the fields before symptoms began to be recorded last week.

More than one hundred of the workers who tested positive are still asymptomatic (i.e., display no symptoms but are nonetheless capable of spreading the contagion). Public health authorities, fearing more extensive community spread, are now testing clerks at a Port Dover grocery store where the workers shopped.

The migrant workers, consigned to cramped, poorly-ventilated bunkhouses, live in ideal conditions for the spread of the virus. With the highly time-sensitive asparagus crop requiring immediate harvest, Scotlynn Group CEO Scott Biddle has put out a call for local labour, promising a \$10 per hour wage increase over the wages of the foreign workers. This move, which amounts to bribing unemployed local workers to risk their health and even their lives, has outraged the migrant workers and their advocates, who point out that

they have laboured in the fields in substandard conditions for years at or near the minimum wage.

The outbreak in Norfolk County is only one of a number of hotspots in the southern Ontario agricultural sector. Near St. Thomas, south of London, 20 new cases were recorded last week at an Ontario Plants Propagation greenhouse operation. Another 40 cases have occurred at Greenhill Produce, near Chatham. Twenty people throughout Windsor-Essex tested positive over the weekend, most of them temporary foreign farm workers. On Saturday, an unnamed 30-year-old Mexican worker in the county died from COVID-19.

About 20,000 migrant workers arrive each spring in Ontario for the growing season. A recent US study showed that the average life expectancy of a career migrant farm labourer in that country was an appalling 49 years of age. Chris Ramsaroop, organizer for Justice for Migrant Farm Workers—responding to the contagion amongst foreign temporary field-hands in Canada—cited a lack of personal protective equipment and hand sanitizer, overcrowded and unsanitary housing conditions, and the failure to separate infected workers from their colleagues as standard procedures in an industry that continues to exploit its workforce to the hilt.

The rise in infections has not been confined to agricultural areas. A CBC News report last week noted that in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), which accounted for 76 percent of all new COVID-19 cases in Ontario in the month of May, enclosed industrial sites are threatening to become the next virus hotspots.

In Peel region, which encompasses the cities of Brampton and Mississauga just west of Toronto, public health authorities announced that they are tracking “several large workplace clusters” linked to

manufacturing plants, warehouses, and delivery companies. Since March, 450 workplace infections have been recorded. About 200 cases originated in just thirteen Peel workplaces. The region's Chief Medical Officer stated last week that "dozens more" workplaces are now suffering outbreaks.

In Toronto, two recent clusters have been identified at large grocery stores.

In York Region, just north of Toronto, authorities have identified 45 workplaces that have recorded two or more infections. At the Honda auto assembly plant in Alliston, three workers have tested positive. That plant re-opened on May 11. The company has yet to provide full information on whether at least two of the infected workers attended the plant after it re-started production.

In the Detroit Three assembly plants in Ontario, where the Unifor union has worked closely with the major automakers to send autoworkers back into unsafe plants where they interact in close contact at entrance gates and on the shop floor, the ruling elite is also accepting that large numbers of workers and their families will get infected. Kristen Dziczek, vice president for industry, economy and labour at the Centre for Automotive Research, a key industry think-tank that assisted the Big Three in reopening their facilities in Canada, Mexico and the United States, bluntly told CBC, "I think we're going to see hotspots keep popping up and that's going to be one of the disruption factors in auto production."

Ontario meatpacking plants continue to experience COVID-19 infections. A Conestoga processing operation north of Kitchener had at least 90 cases by the end of May. In Brampton, Maple Lodge Farms poultry processors reported 25 cases and one death on May 4. The first case of infection had been confirmed on April 15. However, the company did not publicly announce the presence of the virus in the plant for three more weeks. It was later discovered that workers there had filed safety complaints with the Ontario Labour Relations Board without any response.

The widespread outbreaks of COVID-19 in workplaces across a broad range of economic sectors underscore the criminal indifference shown towards the health and lives of working people by the right-wing Ford provincial government and the entire ruling elite. Ford granted vast exemptions from lockdown

restrictions to mines and manufacturing facilities that were clearly not essential services, accelerated the back-to-work drive as case numbers continued to increase sharply, and failed to provide medical staff with adequate personal protective equipment. At the federal level, the Trudeau Liberals focused all their efforts on organizing a bailout for the financial oligarchy and big business worth hundreds of billions of dollars, while placing workers and the health system on rations.

The back-to-work drive by governments across Canada is being implemented in flagrant disregard of repeated World Health Organization warnings that mass testing and contact tracing capabilities need to be developed and health care systems significantly strengthened before any relaxation of restrictions on normal economic and social life. Even now, some five months after the declaration of a global pandemic, workers in industry after industry report shortages of personal protective equipment, crowded workplaces, increasing line-speeds and unsanitary company washrooms and cafeterias.

The rate of testing in Ontario remains low, although it has recently picked up slowly. Medical experts have also noted that the province's contact-tracing capabilities are woefully inadequate. Global experience has shown that increased testing without 24-hour contact-tracing turnarounds will do little to arrest the spread of the virus. In regions with higher rates of virus transmission, it is still taking several days for positive cases to even be questioned about their contacts and then several more days for the contacts to be traced, let alone tested.



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