

Canadian Cargill plant closed after more than 80 employees test positive for coronavirus

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Last week, on Thursday, December 17, a Cargill meat-processing plant in Guelph, Ontario, was forced to close after a major outbreak of coronavirus. Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph (WDG) Public Health announced that day that 87 cases had been confirmed, concentrated to the Guelph facility, while an additional 42 were considered to have been exposed and instructed to self-quarantine.

According to the WDG Public Health website, there have been 2,175 confirmed cases and 44 fatalities in the WDG area, a population of approximately 272,000. The area was moved into the “red zone” by the government of Ontario on December 11, triggering stricter social distancing protocols, including limiting large gatherings.

In an email to Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) Kitchener-Waterloo, a Cargill spokesperson wrote, “We are taking this step out of an abundance of caution as our local workforce deals with the community-wide impacts of COVID-19. As we work in partnership with the union, our employees will be paid the 36 hours per week as outlined in our collective agreement.”

In a statement issued by the company, Cargill “stressed the importance” that “any employees who are sick or have been exposed to anyone with COVID-19 in the last 14 days to stay home.”

However, despite the outbreak in the plant and the spread of the virus in the community, Cargill has announced that it plans to reopen on December 29, less than two weeks after the shutdown began and well before the WDG area leaves “red zone” status.

Moreover, before shutting production Cargill required workers finish their shifts to process what unprocessed meats remained in the facility.

Tim Deelstra, spokesman for United Food and

Commercial Workers (UFCW) Locals 175 and 633, says the union has been speaking on a daily basis with Cargill about the coronavirus outbreak. “Employees are going to be covered as per the collective agreement for this week. And we’re having ongoing conversations with the employer about what the future will look like. Certainly, again, our role as the union is not only to protect their physical health and safety, but also to look after their economic health and safety, too.”

However, the UFCW allowed the plant to continue operating for weeks after the outbreak first became known. Two weeks prior to shutdown, 21 employees at the plant had already tested positive, along with approximately 80 additional workers who were exposed and sent home to self-quarantine, with no action being taken by the UFCW.

In fact, the Guelph plant experienced its first cases back in May. Deelstra feigned concern for the workers, saying, “It’s a big concern. People are trying to go to work, and we want them to be safe and we want them to go home safe.”

In reality, the UFCW on both sides of the US-Canada border has played a crucial role in allowing management to maintain production in the teeth of the pandemic. When JBS beef workers in Greeley, Colorado walked off the job in July after 6 of their co-workers had died, UFCW Local 7 responded by circulating a flyer instructing workers to remain on the job. It has limited itself to toothless publicity stunts, such as renting a billboard with the names and pictures of the dead JBS workers and driving a billboard truck with slogans demanding hazard pay around to local grocery stores.

The local union in Waterloo, Iowa even worked with management at a Tyson Foods pork plant to cook up an incentive program for perfect attendance even as

managers took bets on how many workers would eventually become infected. Over 1,000 workers in the facility have fallen ill and five have died.

Jon Nash, Cargill Protein North America President, issued a statement claiming it was a “difficult decision” to idle production at the plant “because, as part of the food supply chain, it is an essential service.” In reality, what is “essential” for Cargill and other meatpacking companies is keeping workers on the job to continue producing profits. While the company has not released its financial results for 2020, the Minnesota-based company typically makes around \$115 billion in revenue and \$3 billion in profits annually.



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