

“The working conditions are hell”—Ontario allows COVID-19 to run rampant through workplaces

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The current surge of COVID-19 infections in Ontario is being driven by major workplace outbreaks that are the direct product of the refusal of governments and big business to take the necessary measures to protect workers on the job.

In recent weeks, hundreds of workers have been infected in several major workplace outbreaks, including at a Cargill meatpacking plant in Guelph and four Amazon fulfillment centres in the Peel Region, which lies on the outskirts of Toronto.

Cargill revealed on December 17 that 82 workers at its Guelph plant had been infected and that the facility would be temporarily closed.

After lecturing workers to remain home for 14 days, Cargill management promptly announced that full production will recommence today, December 29, less than two weeks after the initial shutdown. This reckless decision reflects not just Cargill’s disregard for the health and wellbeing of its workers. It is possible only because Ontario’s Conservative government has refused to impose COVID-19 restrictions on most workplaces (aside from retail outlets), despite new infections reaching record levels.

Premier Doug Ford announced a “lockdown” December 21 with so many loopholes that large parts of the economy are continuing to operate. It delayed the beginning of restrictions on social gatherings until December 26, thereby encouraging dangerous levels of social contact over the Christmas holiday. And under Ford’s “lockdown,” all food processing, distribution and delivery, manufacturing, parts supply, and temporary staffing operations are allowed to remain open as usual.

The refusal to place any restrictions at most

workplace operations, especially production facilities, is an essential component of the ruling elite’s policy of prioritizing corporate profits over human lives, which has animated its response to the pandemic throughout. Even Ontario’s highly selective official data, which undoubtedly fails to capture the true extent of workplace infections due to the virtual collapse of contact tracing, shows that workplaces are one of the most likely sources of COVID-19 infections. As of December 21, the province had officially recorded 6,242 workplace infections since the beginning of the pandemic, compared to 1,404 in recreational settings like bars and restaurants. Although Ontario’s Ministry of Labour boasts that it has carried out more than 31,000 workplace inspections since the outbreak of the pandemic, just one employer has been fined for failing to observe COVID-19 restrictions.

Earlier this month, workplaces emerged as the most common setting for new outbreaks in Ontario, surpassing even care homes. As of December 4, workplaces accounted for almost a third of the province’s active COVID-19 outbreaks, a total of 227 out of 773.

The US-based food processing giant Cargill has become notorious during the pandemic for its indifference to the health and safety of its workforce. At the company’s High River, Alberta facility, 935 of the plant’s 2000 employees were infected with the virus last spring. As anger among the workforce grew following the death of a colleague, Cargill felt compelled to temporarily close the facility. However, it was swiftly reopened with the complicity of the United Food and Commercial Workers union, which infamously declared that workers should not take any

job action to protest life-threatening working conditions because to do so would be “illegal” under their collective agreement and Alberta labour law.

Following the High River outbreak, Cargill management and union representatives released various statements patting each other on the back and proclaiming that measures complying with public health order regulations had been implemented at its plants. These lies were exposed by workers who anonymously came forward to media outlets to share stories of these protocols being non-existent. One worker told CBC News that, after testing positive for COVID-19 and having subsequently been instructed by the local health authority to quarantine for 14 days, he was called and encouraged by managers to return to work after just 3 days away from the plant. Management told the worker that if you had tested positive but weren’t exhibiting symptoms, there was no need to self-isolate.

The lack of safety precautions in Cargill’s facilities is all the more scandalous given that the Trudeau Liberal government provided a multi-million-dollar subsidy to the highly profitable conglomerate ostensibly to fund safety measures. Seventy-seven million dollars was handed over to the US-based meatpacking giant, which had annual revenue of \$115 billion, as part of a public relations campaign to promote the “reopening” of the economy amid the pandemic that included additional multi-million handouts to other large meatpackers like JBS.

Conditions in Amazon’s massive distribution centres are no better. Over 400 cases of COVID-19 have recently been reported from four Amazon warehouses in Peel Region, a major distribution centre of goods for transport across Canada. “The working conditions are hell,” one former Amazon employee told the *National Post*. “There is no social distancing, there is no sanitation,” said another. “Many of them, 99 percent of them,” the worker added, “are scared of working there, but they have no choice.”

One employee told the *Post* that Amazon supervisors even discourage workers from socially distancing while waiting to use the washroom because it takes up too much space on the plant floor.

Public health department data for the region shows that most workplace outbreaks have taken place at food processing, logistics and transportation facilities.

Peel Region records show that five of the top six current workplace outbreaks are at “distribution centres,” but are refusing to name the company or companies involved. However, anonymous sources have confirmed to media agencies that four of the distribution centres are Amazon fulfillment centres.

The concealment of the outbreaks at Amazon is part of a deliberate provincial government policy. Under the bogus pretext of protecting privacy, authorities are refusing to release the names and addresses of workplaces where COVID-19 is spreading, so as to prevent the growth of worker opposition. As the WSWs previously reported, this criminal conduct has led to communities being unknowingly exposed to massive outbreaks, such as in Mississauga where a huge outbreak at a still unidentified worksite resulted in 61 workers catching COVID-19 in September. At least 49 additional infections were linked to direct contacts in the local community. (See: Canadian authorities covering up workplace COVID-19 outbreaks to justify keeping economy and schools open)

While workers at Amazon and Cargill are forced to risk their lives at work for meagre wages, their respective owners grow ever wealthier. The fortune of the Cargill-MacMillan family, the owners of Cargill—the largest privately owned company in the US—was reported to be more than \$40 billion in July 2019. Last summer Cargill paid out record dividends of more than a billion dollars to family members. Meanwhile, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, the world’s richest man, has seen his wealth increase by more than \$90 billion, to surpass more than \$200 billion, during the course of a pandemic that has ravaged working peoples’ lives and livelihoods.



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