

COVID-19 outbreak kills three workers at Red Deer, Alberta Olymel meatprocessing plant

Janet Browning
28 February 2021

A massive COVID-19 outbreak at the Olymel meatpacking plant in Red Deer, Alberta has claimed the lives of three workers over the past month. The outbreak and the authorities' refusal to do anything to protect the low-paid workers' lives is in keeping with the Canadian capitalist elite's prioritization of corporate profits over human lives throughout the pandemic.

The outbreak at the Olymel plant began in November. To date, 500 cases have been linked to the plant, with 156 currently considered active.

The first fatal victim of the outbreak was Darwin Doloque, a 35-year-old permanent resident who immigrated to Canada from the Philippines. Darwin was found dead at his home in Red Deer, Alberta on January 28.

Olymel did not close the plant until February 15, three weeks after Darwin's death.

The company, which boasts on its website that it is a "Canadian leader in the production, processing and distribution of pork," has 35 production and distribution locations, exports products to 65 countries, and has \$4.5 billion in annual revenues. At its Red Deer plant, 50,000 pigs are butchered every week.

So far, one fifth of the Red Deer plant's 1,850-strong workforce has become infected due to the outbreak. Most of the low-paid and part-time Olymel workers have second and third jobs to make ends meet. Despite this, they were not told to isolate while waiting up to a week for their COVID-19 test results, which no doubt contributed to rapid community spread.

On February 21, a female worker in her 60's who has not yet been publicly identified succumbed to COVID-19. On February 24, Henry De Leon, a worker in his fifties who has worked at the plant since 2005, died. He leaves behind his wife, children and grandchildren.

The number of active COVID-19 cases in Red Deer, a city of about 100,000 mid-way between Edmonton and Calgary, reached 454 in mid-February, with 194 of those cases linked

to the outbreak among workers at the Olymel plant. At that time, Red Deer's cases accounted for 65 per cent of the active cases in Alberta Health Services' Central Zone.

"As a community, we're among the highest numbers we've had throughout the pandemic," commented Red Deer Mayor Tara Veer, who added that hospitals in the central zone would struggle to cope with a further rise in cases. "We have a choice right now to stop community spread. Or, if we fail to do so now, then we will be in even more concerning consequences in the next 10 to 14 days."

There have now been outbreaks at 8 meat packing plants in Alberta, as cases of COVID-19 continue to rise in the province's wide-open economy. This underscores that the fate of the Olymel workers is not due to a particularly ruthless employer, but the reckless back-to-work policy being implemented by Alberta Premier Jason Kenney and his hard-right United Conservative Party (UCP) government. With the full support of the federal Liberal government, Kenney's Tories have lifted all but the most token public health measures in recent weeks, even as more infectious COVID-19 variants take hold and spread.

The UCP government refused to act on calls for it to order the temporary closure of the Red Deer Olymel plant, leaving it for the company to ultimately grudgingly do so.

As the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union held token protests outside the plant as part of a futile campaign aimed at persuading the Kenney government to step in, Olymel was allowed to continue ordering workers into its COVID-19-stricken Red Deer plant for several days in order to clear a backlog of pig carcasses before imposing its temporary shutdown. As a result, workers lives were unnecessarily placed at further risk.

Totally disregarding the threat posed by the pandemic, Olymel had been making plans in the weeks prior to the temporary shutdown to intensify production, including by hiring new low-wage workers.

Alberta Health Services has sought to wash its hands of

any responsibility for the outbreak's spread. "It's important to remember this particular plant has had sporadic cases, one or two at a time, for several months, and the processes that had been put in place at the plant site had been very successful in reducing spread," claimed Alberta's chief medical officer of health, Dr. Deena Hinshaw, last Tuesday. "Unfortunately," she continued, "I think there were a concurrence of a number of events that were not limited to events directly on that plant site, and therefore we did see an increase in cases."

This is a not too subtle attempt to blame workers for the deadly COVID-19 outbreak.

If the company and authorities have been able to treat the lives of the workers and their relatives with such reckless disregard, it is because of the subservience of the corporatist trade unions. As across Canada and North America, they have sabotaged all worker resistance to the life-threatening working conditions in the meatpacking industry.

Opposed to any independent action by workers to shut down the plant, Thomas Hesse, president of United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 401 and Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) President Gil McGowan spent days pleading for a meeting with the premier and provincial labour minister to beg them to close workplaces like the Red Deer plant with large COVID-19 outbreaks. "I'm going to remind them that their job is to protect the public, not to protect the profits of corporations at the expense of workers or the public," said the AFL's McGowan. "I'm going to demand that they do their damn jobs."

This is diversionary bluster. It was the UFCW Local 401 President Hesse who last spring ordered meatpacking workers at the Cargill plant in High River, where over 950 infections had been recorded, not to take job action to protest their return to work following a brief plant shutdown because a strike would be "illegal."

Three deaths were ultimately linked to that outbreak, which remains the largest single workplace outbreak of COVID-19 in Canada to date. Hesse and the UFCW's prioritization of their cozy collective bargaining relationships with corporate managers and government ministers has been replicated by trade unions across Canada. Teachers' unions in Ontario, for example, have used exactly the same argument as Hesse—that all job action against the dangerous reopening of schools would be "illegal" under the state-designed pro-employer collective bargaining system—to block educators from opposing unsafe safe working conditions.

For his part, McGowan has led the AFL's pathetic "Stand up to Kenney" campaign. It is directed at preventing the eruption of mass working class opposition to the UCP government, by encouraging the sending of letters to UCP

legislators protesting Kenney's massive cuts to public spending and plans to privatize large swathes of the public health system.

The unions' smothering of all independent working class action against Alberta's life-threatening workplace conditions has left relatives of deceased workers to seek justice on an individual basis before the capitalist courts.

A class-action lawsuit and police investigation have been initiated after Ariana Quesada, 16, of High River filed a formal complaint asking police to investigate Cargill's potential criminal negligence in the death of her father. Benito Quesada, a 51-year-old immigrant from Mexico supporting a wife and four children, was hospitalized with COVID-19 in mid-April, 2020, and died on May 7. His family was barred from visiting him except to say their final goodbyes. The Quesada family is demanding accountability from Cargill, alleging the company failed to take adequate measures to protect Benito from the coronavirus.

"We have filed a complaint ... to finally bring justice to my dad ... to finally hold Cargill accountable for what they did. I spent Christmas with one less person to hug. And all the executives and general managers, everyone at Cargill got to spend Christmas with their loved ones. And I did not get that." Ariana Quesada said in an interview which aired on CBC.

The RCMP has confirmed it has opened an investigation. The probe is the first known instance in Canada of police investigating a workplace-related COVID-19 death.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact