UFCW refuses to defend meatpackers as Alberta government approves reopening of COVID-stricken Olymel plant

Carl Bronski
7 March 2021

Alberta's United Conservative Party (UCP) government greenlighted the re-opening of slaughterhouse and meatpacking operations at Olymel's Red Deer plant this past Thursday and Friday even as a virulent COVID-19 outbreak continues to plague the 1,850 low-wage workers at the pork processing facility.

At least 515 workers have been infected by the virus since mid-November when the outbreak began.

The plant is reopening with at least 91 COVID-19 cases still active among the workforce. Four deaths have resulted from the outbreak, including three in the weeks leading up to and during a two-week plant shutdown that began in mid-February. Several other workers remain severely sickened by the virus.

Workers are once again being herded back onto the killing floor by a government that has repeatedly demonstrated that the corporate profits of Olymel, a company with annual revenue of over $4 billion, are more important than workers' lives. Since November, government health and labour agencies have visited or remotely checked the plant on at least 16 different occasions. Every time, they chose to keep production rolling even as infections steadily climbed.

The UCP government's steadfast refusal to close the plant left it up to Olymel to grudgingly take the decision, which it made sure to implement on its own terms. Olymel was thus allowed to continue ordering workers into its COVID-19-stricken plant for several days in order to clear a backlog of pig carcasses before finally imposing a 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.

The company is now telling the largely immigrant workforce that procedures are in place to ensure their safety. "Reopening can occur because Olymel management and the regulators are satisfied that employees can return to the plant safely," said company spokesperson Richard Vigneault.

Attempting to wash the company's hands of any responsibility for a resurgence in cases, Vigneault cynically blamed the actions of workers in advance for any future outbreak. "Alberta Health Services authorities," continued Vigneault, "have however specified that the coronavirus is still spreading and that everyone is at risk of contracting it, whether in the community or otherwise. Accordingly, they recommend the utmost vigilance."

It goes without saying that not everyone is at the same risk of illness or death. As they have already so tragically discovered, workers crowded together in carpools and in plant bottlenecks, such as break rooms and lavatories, and labouring in the moist, cold slaughterhouse conditions most conducive to mask breakdown and virus-spread are at much greater risk of infection than Olymel company executives and union bureaucrats in their private offices and work-at-home redoubts.

In a survey by United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 401, over 75 percent of respondents said that they were afraid to return to the plant.

What has been the union apparatuses' response to this overwhelming opposition? Predictably, it has been to mouth militant rhetoric against the company while doing absolutely nothing to protect the health and safety of workers. Local 401 President Thomas Hesse has insisted that the plant is not yet safe; that the company is putting "pigs ahead of people"; and that he, like the workers, is "scared, confused and grieving."

© World Socialist Web Site

Yet while acknowledging that the low-paid meatpackers are working in dangerous, potentially life-threatening conditions, Hesse and the UFCW are adamantly opposed to workers taking any practical action to shut the plant down so as to protect their health and lives. All they have done is extend their support to a bogus call by the New Democratic Party, the official opposition in the Alberta legislature, for a public inquiry into the outbreak at the Olymel plant. This is a process that even were the UCP government to agree to it, which is unlikely, would be held months, even years, hence and thus do precisely nothing to safeguard workers and their loved ones in the here and now.

Workers should also reject Hesse's claims to be "confused" and "scared." He is part of a union apparatus that has systematically prioritized its cozy relations with employers and governments across North America over organizing job action to protect the workers it purports to represent.

The unfolding tragedy in Red Deer has already been mirrored in dozens of slaughterhouses across North America, including in Hesse's own jurisdiction with the infection of 950 of 2,000 workers and three deaths at Cargill's High River, Alberta slaughterhouse last spring.

The record of the industry over the past year gives no cause for union "confusion." Outbreaks and deaths are considered the cost of doing business by the food processors. And in jurisdiction after jurisdiction, union officials, after ensuring their "outrage" is properly recorded, have refused to back their memberships by organizing or even authorizing strike action to save their very lives.

At Cargill, as workers clamoured for job action, Hesse was keen to tell reporters that no work stoppages would be organized. "We are looking at legal options. We are not asking for a work stoppage. A work stoppage would not be legal," he said, referring to the terms of the workers' collective bargaining agreement and the anti-worker provisions of the Alberta Labour Code.

Of course, no effective challenge to Cargill's return-to-work drive was ever pursued. Workers were simply abandoned and advised to weigh their own personal options on their return to work.

If the current struggle at Olymel remains under the control of the UFCW, its outcome will be no different.

The pandemic has cast into sharp relief the role of the unions as the junior partners of the meat processing corporations, assisting in the maximization of profit extraction from the largely immigrant and low-wage workforce. In this, the UFCW has played an especially pernicious role. Representing low-wage and highly exploited workers at hundreds of plants across North America, the union has worked systematically to block all worker opposition to the continued operation of the meatpacking giants amid the pandemic.

Even before the emergence of COVID-19, the meatpacking industry had some of the highest rates of workplace injuries and illnesses across North America, driven by unsanitary conditions and breakneck line speeds. Packed tightly on the line, meatpacking workers perform the same precise cutting motions thousands of times each day, producing lacerations due to fatigue, joint dislocations as well as astronomical levels of carpal tunnel syndrome and other cumulative trauma injuries.

The UFCW's reliance on the labour and health and safety boards of Alberta—overseen by the pro-big business, United Conservative Party government of Jason Kenney—is a flagrant abdication of its responsibility to protect the well-being of the vulnerable Olymel workers. The union bureaucrats are more concerned with reassuring employers and the government that they are "responsible partners," who will enforce capitalist labour laws and contracts, than in fighting for the very lives of the workers they claim to represent.

To advance and enforce their own demands for a safe place to work and, when necessary, initiate job actions to protect their lives, workers need to build new organizations of struggle—rank-and-file safety committees independent of the corporatist, pro-capitalist UFCW.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site