

Ontario government covered up massive coronavirus outbreak at Amazon's Brampton warehouse

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The massive COVID-19 outbreak at Amazon's Heritage Road fulfillment centre in Brampton, one of the largest warehouses operated by the multibillion dollar conglomerate in Canada, was deliberately covered up by the Ontario provincial government prior to the site's forced closure March 12. This is the only conclusion that can be drawn from media reports this week revealing that Ontario Ministry of Labour officials visited the site on 12 occasions over the past year and issued nine orders that resulted in no appreciable improvement in workplace safety.

The latest visit occurred March 10, just two days before the Peel Region's Medical Officer of Health ordered the Amazon facility closed for two weeks. This was in response to a surge in COVID-19 cases at the warehouse, with 240 infections in the past few weeks, including of the more infectious and lethal B.1.1.7 variant, and an infection rate higher than the surrounding community, which is itself the epicenter of the pandemic in Ontario.

Since October, at least 617 workers out of a total of 5,000 have contracted COVID-19. In justifying his order to shutter the warehouse, Peel Region Medical Officer of Health Dr. Lawrence Loh stressed that the risk of catching the virus for all workers at the plant was "high," and that cases were being detected with no obvious connection to each other, an indication that the virus is running rampant.

Yet despite this damning assessment, Ontario's Ministry of Labour is refusing to take any action against Amazon. The ministry has announced that its latest investigation based on the March 10 visit is now closed. After a follow-up visit to the warehouse on Monday, March 15, the ministry emphasized that no further orders compelling Amazon to take action would result from its inquiry.

The publication of further details about the contents of Loh's order makes clear just how criminal has been the behaviour of Amazon, its mega-billionaire principal shareholder Jeff Bezos and Canadian governments at all levels since the outset of the pandemic. Dr. Loh urged Amazon to "review its operations to ensure staff are "cohorted by day, time and area of work and type of work" and that "capacity limits for areas, such as washrooms, entrances and lunchrooms are enforced to allow two metres of physical distancing." He also ordered the company to ensure signs about COVID-19 safety protocols are posted in the languages

spoken by its staff," a vital measure given that Amazon employs a highly exploited, overwhelmingly immigrant workforce, many of whom have only limited knowledge of English. Dr. Loh added that the company should explore "transportation options for staff for safe commuting."

In other words, more than one year into a pandemic during which time Bezos' personal wealth alone has risen by over \$24 billion, the local public health agency told Amazon to adopt elementary precautions that could and should have been enforced within hours after the first news of the virus broke.

One wonders what the provincial inspectors actually did during their 12 separate visits, which equates to one inspection per month since the eruption of COVID-19 cases in Canada. There could hardly be a more devastating exposure of the total indifference of Amazon management and the government authorities ostensibly tasked with regulating the company's activities towards workers' health and lives.

Amazon is notorious the world over for its brutal working conditions. No expense is spared in surveilling every move of every worker the moment he or she steps into a warehouse, in imposing bone-crushing performance targets that cause elevated levels of injuries and deaths on the job, and in intimidating workers into keeping their mouths shut about such conditions.

That being said, the catastrophic virus outbreak at the Heritage Road site does not merely expose the horrific working conditions at Amazon, but the entire Canadian ruling elite's homicidal class-based response to the pandemic. This has consisted of tolerating and even encouraging hundreds of thousands of infections and tens of thousands of deaths as prices worth paying to ensure that the profits and wealth of corporate Canada remain protected.

Almost exactly one year ago, the Trudeau Liberal federal government, in close consultation with corporate lobby groups, the trade union bureaucracy and the NDP, agreed to funnel over \$650 billion to the big banks and major corporations to prop up their balance sheets.

As soon as this was concluded, Trudeau led the way in organizing a reckless back-to-work campaign aimed at reopening the economy regardless of the threat to workers' safety so that corporate profits could begin flowing again. The reopening of schools played a particularly important role in this campaign since the ruling class saw it as essential to relieve parents of childcare

responsibilities so that they could return to churning out profits for the capitalists.

Implementing the demands of corporate Canada, the Trudeau government's throne speech last September ruled out comprehensive lockdowns in response to a surge in COVID-19 cases. It emphasized that all future public health measures against the virus should be "short-term" and implemented at the "local level."

In practice, this meant that large employers like Amazon were given free rein to do what they liked with their workforces, in the knowledge that neither the federal nor provincial governments would get in the way of their intensifying production so as to reap maximum profits.

At the provincial level, these homicidal policies were enforced through a combination of lying propaganda about how schools and workplaces are safe and deliberate concealment. Hundreds of workplace outbreaks in Ontario and Quebec have never been publicly reported because the right-wing governments of Doug Ford and Francois Legault, fearing the growth of worker opposition, steadfastly refused to name workplaces where outbreaks have occurred, citing "privacy concerns."

This has had a major impact on the Peel Region. Home to numerous large warehouses and factories and densely populated neighbourhoods, it rapidly emerged as a hotbed for the virus. To give just one example of the state policy of concealment, last fall there was a massive Peel Region workplace outbreak that infected 60 workers and sickened more than 40 in the local community, yet to this day the site of the outbreak remains publicly unknown.

The only reason the Amazon facility was publicly identified as the source of the current outbreak was because Amazon refused to suspend operations until it was ordered shut by public health authorities, and threatened to legally challenge the order. In addition, the outbreak had gotten so out of control that the local transit system had to partially suspend some of its operations. (See: Canadian health officials shut Amazon warehouse after mass COVID-19 outbreak.)

The decision by governments at all levels, irrespective of their political stripes, to let the virus rip through workplaces and schools has led to a disaster. According to partial figures published by the Public Health Agency of Canada, which undoubtedly underestimate the number of workplace infections, more than 10,000 COVID-19 cases have been officially registered as workplace infections. This includes 4,750 in meatpacking and production sites, 2,190 in agricultural production, 1,231 in industrial settings, 866 in distribution and processing and 652 in work camps.

In the meatpacking industry alone, at least three workers at Olymel's plant in Red Deer, Alberta, have lost their lives since January. Three deaths were also recorded last spring in conjunction with another massive outbreak at Cargill's High River, Alberta slaughterhouse.

Workplaces and schools are clearly playing a decisive role in the eruption of a third, even more deadly wave of infections, driven by the more infectious and lethal variants. As of the beginning of the month, 24 percent of all infections recorded in Ontario came from workplaces.

Officials from major cities, including Toronto and Montreal, have openly acknowledged in recent weeks that schools and daycares are serving as one of if not the principal vectors for the transmission of the B.1.1.7 variant first discovered in Britain.

In the Peel Region alone, which is the location of three major Amazon warehouses, students from 206 classes are currently in quarantine, and five schools are totally shut down. A media report Thursday noted that the Peel Region Public School Board and the region's Catholic school board are having to consider closing schools due to mounting opposition among teachers to in-person learning.

The dangerous and life-threatening conditions faced by workers on a daily basis underscore the urgent necessity for waging a political struggle to close all nonessential production and in-person learning to stop the spread of the virus. Amazon workers at Heritage Road and other fulfillment centres across the country must demand a vast expansion of testing and contact tracing, vaccinations for all workers, the reintroduction of hazard pay, and workers' control over the pace of work to allow for social distancing and force an end to the hated speedup regime that compels workers to violate safety rules.

The problems confronting Amazon workers are replicated in schools and other workplaces across Canada. That is why the struggle of Amazon workers will find its strongest allies among logistics workers, educators, health care workers, postal workers and others.

To organize the fight for these policies, Amazon workers at Heritage Road should follow the example of their class brothers and sisters south of the border at Amazon's BW12 Fulfillment center in Baltimore and establish a rank-and-file safety committee independent of the pro-corporate trade unions.

Throughout the pandemic, the unions have intervened to keep production running, endangering the very lives of the workers they claim to represent. At the Cargill plant in High River, it was the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) that corralled workers to return to work with the warning that any strike action would be "illegal." Teachers unions in every province have suppressed popular opposition to dangerous in-person learning.

Amazon workers should link the struggle of their committee with the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which educators have established to push for the closure of schools to save lives, and the network of similar committees that has already arisen across the auto and education sectors in the United States, Europe and Australia in opposition to the capitalist elite's homicidal pandemic response.



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