Worker in Canada's oil and gas industry speaks out over Alberta work camp and worksite COVID-19 outbreaks

Our reporters
15 April 2021

With its crowded work camps, travelling workforce, and close-quartered workplaces, Canada's oil and gas sector is a hotbed for coronavirus transmission. Dozens of outbreaks at sites in and around Fort McMurray and across Alberta, fuelled by the more infectious and deadly B.1.1.7 and P.1 COVID-19 variants, have helped make Alberta the Canadian province with the highest per capita number of active COVID cases.

Reuters reported Saturday that nine Alberta oil sites are currently experiencing coronavirus outbreaks with 115 cases of the new variants. Affected facilities include Canadian Natural Resources Ltd.'s Horizon project, and Suncor Energy's base plant and Syncrude project. Reflecting the mounting crisis in the industry, reports are mounting of labour shortages for skilled workers for annual maintenance work. Due to the increased infection risk, many workers are refusing to travel to Alberta from Newfoundland and other provinces in Atlantic Canada, in spite of increased financial incentives offered by the oil majors.

The inadequate safety precautions in the energy sector have already caused travelling workers to spread the virus to other parts of Canada. In February, the Newfoundland and Labrador provincial government was forced to issue a public warning to returning energy workers about 11 active outbreaks at Alberta worksites after cases associated with the British variant shot up dramatically in Newfoundland.

Alberta Premier Jason Kenney and his United Conservative Party (UCP) government have systematically covered up the surge in infections in the energy sector, which have been driven by their reckless policy of keeping the economy "open" so that profits keep rolling in. When the Newfoundland government issued a pandemic warning in February to returning transient Alberta energy sector workers, the UCP government's official statistics continued to show no confirmed cases of virus variants in Alberta's Northern Zone, where the vast majority of the province's oil and gas facilities are located.

Alberta's chief medical officer of health, Dr. Deena Hinshaw, recently reported on a COVID-19 outbreak linked to a large employer with multiple sites across Western Canada. She said the outbreak was in 3 worksites in Alberta's Central and North Zone, where employees traveled between sites, and that there were 26 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 3 cases of the deadly P.1 variant. Consistent with UCP government policy aimed at covering up and minimizing the threat of workplace infections, Hinshaw failed to name the company. However, 660 City News later revealed that it was PTW Energy Services.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporter spoke to Greg, a 19-year veteran of the oil and gas sector, about his experiences working during the pandemic and his reaction to the latest outbreaks. Asked to comment on the conditions at PTW and other oil companies, Greg explained, "The modern oil and gas infrastructure is a remarkably complex network of collection, processing and distribution facilities all linked together by pipelines, and it is these sorts of facilities that PTW designs, fabricates, installs and maintains. Though their website is predictably short on specifics, with offices in Hinton, Edson and Drayton Valley, PTW is almost certainly participating in the expansion of the Trans Mountain Pipeline.

"I do have some experience installing and operating facilities like these. Modules will be built in yards all

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over western Canada. They might originate in Leduc, Calgary or another city, whoever wins the bid for that specific piece of equipment. Then they'll be shipped by road for installation on a jobsite. Crews will also be coming from all over Western Canada, presenting plenty of chances for infection. Even on small sites, there will be a lot of different trades working close together—equipment operators, steel workers, electricians, instrumentation techs—and even more on the bigger facilities."

Greg talked about the impossibility of ensuring safe working conditions on busy worksites. "You might be able to keep social distancing rules in place between different trades, but not within teams of guys working together," he commented. "The work is all very close quarters. It could be a group of electricians struggling to route cables underneath a building or into a junction box, or a couple of steelworkers shoulder to shoulder in a man-lift bolting structural members together. So then you have to rely on masks. But they are increasingly useless, the more you are exerting yourself, not only due to breath escaping around the mask, but also because masks come loose or even get pulled off."

The conditions workers are being forced to labour under by highly profitable energy conglomerates make it extremely difficult to maintain even the limited and inadequate safety precautions that are in place, Greg explained. "In my opinion, working at a high level of physical exertion, at the pace we are expected to work to maintain production while having our breathing restricted by a properly fitted and functioning mask, is cruel and unusual punishment," he said. "And everybody knows this, from supervisors right down to the guys on the line. So what happens? The masks come off or guys wear their masks loosely or with their nose hanging out. It's not so much being compliant, as appearing to be compliant, so that there is a lower chance of someone getting in trouble and losing their job.

"Also, any site with hydrocarbons requires all workers to wear fire retardant (FR) clothing to protect them from the flash of an explosion. These are the nearly ubiquitous blue coveralls with high visibility strips you see everywhere. But an N95 mask is not FR, so instead workers must wear FR masks, which are entirely incapable of stopping COVID-19. It's an entirely contradictory policy."

We asked Greg if he had a message for fellow oil workers concerned about protecting their health and safety at work under conditions of a raging pandemic and the emergence of deadly new virus variants that are increasingly impacting younger, working age adults with no previous health problems. "There are some pretty heroic efforts from workers to manage these nearly impossible dictates from AHS (Alberta Health Services) as they have been interpreted by oil and gas companies desperate to get back into production after the lockdown," he responded. "It's criminal for the capitalist class, in collusion with the Alberta and Canadian governments, to risk the workers of PTW and other corporations to build a pipeline that will be well positioned to take advantage of the next upswing in global energy prices, extracting more wealth. And all this in the middle of a pandemic induced oil glut!

"It's the absence of class consciousness within the working class that prevents us from understanding the true nature of this push to get the energy sector back to work; to resume the extraction of wealth from Canada on the backs of the working class. We're facing a potential death sentence for the profits of the ruling class, Kenney, and the oil company barons in Calgary and Texas.

"I would like to see oil and gas workers form their own independent rank-and-file safety committees and make this fight for a safe workplace political. Shut down the oil industry until it is safe to go back to work! Demand full pay for the workers until the majority of the population has access to proven vaccines. Then I would feel safe working."

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