

COVID-19 workplace outbreaks continue to surge across Canada

Matthew Richter, Roger Jordan

17 May 2021

As Canada's deadly third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic rages on, workplace outbreaks continue to mount across the country. From oil workers to meatpackers and logistics workers, working people and their loved ones are being needlessly put at risk because governments at all levels, acting on behalf of the ruling elite, insist that the economy remain "open" to generate corporate profits.

In the largest workplace outbreak yet recorded in Canada, a staggering 1,361 workers at Canadian Natural Resources Ltd.'s Horizon tar sands oil site near Fort McMurray, Alberta, have tested positive. Two workers have died. This is just the largest of dozens of outbreaks in the oil sector, which has become a hotbed for infections due to the hard-right United Conservative Party (UCP) government's determination to keep energy businesses operating at full tilt so that Big Oil can continue to rake in profits.

Cases skyrocketed at the CNRL Horizon site throughout April as the company proceeded with maintenance work, despite warnings that the large number of transient workers travelling to the site would create perfect conditions for the virus to spread. "I know I got it there," a 65-year-old contractor told Global News. "I was scared, yeah... the thing is dying alone, nobody there to say bye to or nothing like that. It was scary. I thought I was done."

In Quebec, workplace outbreaks peaked at 678 in late April and have since fallen back to a still high 561. Major economic sectors particularly affected include metal producers, lumber, clothing and textile products industries, slaughterhouses, grocery stores, and house construction. A massive outbreak is currently under way at the du Breton pork slaughterhouse in Rivièrel-du-Loup, where at least 104 out of the approximately 500-strong workforce have been infected.

In British Columbia, the major Site C dam construction project in the province's north declared an outbreak at the end of April after 40 workers tested positive within two months. Nine businesses closed last week in the Lower Mainland due to workplace transmission, including eight in the Fraser Health region, and one in Vancouver Coastal Health. Since the beginning of April, over 100 businesses have temporarily closed in the Lower Mainland due to workplace outbreaks.

In Ottawa, local health authorities reported 16 active workplace outbreaks last week, including at construction sites, manufacturing plants, warehouses, and offices. In line with the conspiracy of silence enforced by the provincial Conservative government and local health authorities across Ontario, Ottawa Public Health has

refused to identify any of the worksites or to provide information on how many infections were recorded at each location. Underscoring the utter indifference shown by big business towards the lives of working people, Medical Officer of Health Dr. Vera Etches reported, "Our team is now being inundated from workplaces where more than two people have tested positive. We're also seeing outbreaks in offices where people could have potentially worked from home."

In Toronto, where public outrage has forced local health authorities to begin naming workplaces with COVID-19 outbreaks, 18 new locations were added to their list when it was updated last Friday. These included a Serano bakery, a Sobeys grocery store, a Bombardier Aerospace facility, and the Roots Leather Factory.

A Cargill poultry plant in London, Ontario suspended production for 10 days in April after at least 118 workers became infected. The plant employs about 900 workers and processes 100,000 chickens a day for the fast-food titan McDonald's. The Middlesex-London Public Health Unit noted that one of the new, more contagious variants may have been driving the outbreak at the facility.

A spokesman for Cargill said that workers were paid for 36 hours while the plant was idled, in accordance with an agreement made with United Food and Commercial Workers Local 175. The typical workweek for a worker at Cargill's London plant is more than 50 hours. This means most workers will have received little more than half of their regular pay for the week-and-a-half the plant was shuttered.

"The mood at the plant is that management doesn't care about them. They let it go on for a while and in my opinion they only took steps when the worker discontent started to reach levels where it wasn't manageable for them anymore," a worker told the *London Free Press* on condition of anonymity.

"If you could see the boning department, they are packed in like sardines. There is a plastic sheet separating everyone ... Everyone is wearing a blue surgical mask and a plastic face shield. However that doesn't seem to have helped much."

Cargill is the largest privately owned corporation in America. Employing over 155,000 workers across 70 countries, the corporation has been a mainstay in agricultural commodities for well over a century. Annual revenue for the corporation averages around \$115 billion USD and profits \$3 billion USD. Profits were up 17 percent year over year, according to a report published in

July 2020 by BNN Bloomberg.

As profits soared during the pandemic, Cargill paid out massive dividends to the 125 family members who own the company. Dividend payouts rose 76 percent from the previous year, totaling \$1.13 billion, from \$643 million in 2019. Poultry products are a significant contributor to Cargill's bottom line.

Cargill's affirmation of its commitment to worker health and safety rings hollow after major outbreaks at Cargill meatpacking plants across North America. The Guelph Cargill facility, whose workforce is also represented by UFCW Local 175, reported 87 confirmed cases among its staff last December.

Until COVID-19 ravaged the workforce at CNRL's Horizon site, Canada's largest workplace outbreak since the pandemic began was at Cargill's High River, Alberta meatpacking plant. Of the 2,000 workers employed at the Cargill plant, 935 tested positive for COVID-19 last spring and three workers died. Another 600 close contacts also were infected.

This overview of recent workplace outbreaks in Canada, which is by no means comprehensive, gives a sense of the tremendous human cost of the ruling elite's homicidal back-to-work drive. This policy has been overseen by the federal minority Liberal government, which relies on the support of the social-democratic NDP for its majority in parliament. In its throne speech last September, the Trudeau Liberal government stipulated that any future COVID-19-related shutdowns should be "short-term" and "local" in nature.

Doug Ford's Ontario Conservative government drafted a "Fall Pandemic Preparedness Plan" in this spirit. Expressing the prioritization of profits over lives even more nakedly, it declared, "The return to an earlier stage of provincial reopening, or even regional approaches to tightening would be avoided in favour of organization-specific or localized change." In other words, non-essential workers must remain on the job in order to ensure the flow of profit to the capitalists.

This policy, and its corollary—the reopening of schools so parents could be forced back to work under unsafe conditions amid the pandemic—fuelled Canada's second wave, which claimed over 10,000 lives last winter, and this spring's ongoing third wave.

Even when Ford was grudgingly forced to impose province-wide "lockdown" measures in late December and again this April due to dramatic surges in COVID-19 cases, workplaces—especially manufacturing, resource industries and construction—were almost entirely excluded from the restrictions. Underlining that the disregard for workers' lives is common to all the establishment parties, BC's New Democrat Premier John Horgan has pursued a similar course and tried to blame young workers for the surge in COVID-19 cases, remarking in early April, "Don't blow this for the rest of us."

The trade unions have played a pivotal role in implementing the ruling class' back-to-work/back-to-school policy. Throughout the pandemic their focus has been on suppressing worker opposition to dangerous working conditions and further expanding their corporatist relationship with big business and government. This anti-worker policy is typified by the Canadian Labour Congress' claim, announced in a banner atop its homepage, that "In Canada, we've weathered the pandemic by sticking together and

supporting each other."

At the Cargill plant in London, the UFCW did nothing to protect the workforce. Tim Deelstra, a spokesman for UFCW Local 175, remarked on the closure of the plant in mid-April, "We support this decision by the company." In other words, the UFCW never even called for the plant to close, let alone organized worker job action to shut it down. It simply waited until the company determined that the situation was so bad, with so many workers unable or unwilling to report to work, that it had no other option.

A vast social chasm separates ordinary workers from the union bureaucrats and their six-figure salaries. UFCW Canada National President Paul Meinema made \$219,170 in 2019 when the average hourly wage for a butcher at Cargill with three years of experience was \$20.10.

At CNRL's Horizon tar sands site in Alberta, the unions are playing a similar role. Alberta Federation of Labour Gill McGowan made a pathetic appeal to the hard-right United Conservative government of Jason Kenney to close down the CNRL site and others with major outbreaks. Workers "and their leaders in their respective unions," said McGowan last week, "have told me ..., yes, they want to work—but they want to work in conditions that are safe, and as it stands right now, conditions are not safe in most if not all oilsands-related construction projects."

The AFL president's remarks unintentionally provide a damning indictment of his organization's policy. Even though over 1,300 workers have already been infected at the CNRL site and McGowan admits that "conditions are not safe in most if not all oilsands-related construction projects," he has nothing to offer workers but a humble appeal to the very government that has insisted on keeping the energy sector open throughout the pandemic, dismissed the virus as a "flu," and blamed the population for having North America's highest per capita number of COVID-19 infections.

To defend their health and very lives, workers must build rank-and-file safety committees independent of and in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions. These committees must fight for the immediate closure of all nonessential production with full pay for all affected workers until the pandemic is brought under control. The fight for these urgently needed demands must include a frontal assault on the vast wealth piled up by the ruling elite during the pandemic, which should be expropriated to expand health services and meet other crying social needs. We urge all workers across Canada who recognize that the fight to end the pandemic is a political struggle and requires the independent intervention of the working class to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and join the struggle to build rank-and-file committees.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact