

Third oil worker dies from COVID-19 outbreak at Canadian Natural Resources' Alberta worksite

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The massive COVID-19 outbreak at Canadian Natural Resources' Horizon oil tar-sands worksite in northern Alberta claimed another worker's life Tuesday, bringing the publicly acknowledged death toll among the workforce to three.

With the local health system collapsing, the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, where the Horizon mine and most other Canadian oil tar-sands operations are located, declared a local state of emergency late last month. Since then infections and deaths have continued to surge.

The latest victim was a worker in his 60s, who had two children and seven grandchildren. He had been employed at CNRL's Horizon site as a pipefitter from late March.

Alberta has been ravaged by a third wave of the pandemic directly attributable to the Canadian ruling class' policy, implemented by the federal Liberal government and with especial gusto by the province's United Conservative Party (UCP) government, of prioritizing corporate profits over saving lives. Currently Alberta has among the highest per capita infection and active COVID-19 case rates in North America, and in proportionate terms Wood Buffalo is the hardest-hit region in Alberta.

According to local public health officials, there are currently 30 workplace and 19 school outbreaks in Wood Buffalo, and 31 COVID-stricken patients are hospitalized at the Northern Lights Regional Health Centre (NLRHC) in Fort McMurray, Wood Buffalo's principal population centre. Eight of the 31 are in intensive care (ICU), but just during the past week 16 other ICU patients were transferred from NLRHC to Edmonton hospitals.

Across the province, there are 241 COVID patients in ICUs. In anticipation of a continuing wave of infection and death, the UCP government is hastily building more

field hospitals, even as it orders schools across the province, with the lone exception of those in Wood Buffalo, to reopen next Tuesday.

Throughout the pandemic oil-sands mining operations and the work camps that support them have been designated an essential service by the hard-right, Jason Kenney-led UCP government, and have thus been exempt from any restrictions on their operating at full-tilt. When the government was recently compelled to announce a new rule that workplaces with 10 or more infections must close, the energy sector was excluded as an "essential service."

As of Wednesday, the CNRL Horizon outbreak, now the largest in Canada, had infected 1,496 workers. There have been dozens of other COVID-19 outbreaks at other CNRL and oil tar-sands operations across Alberta.

The more infectious virus variants, including the B.1.1.7 British variant and the P1 Brazilian variant, make it impossible to contain aerosol viral spread at a packed work camp with transient workers from across the country. Several CNRL workers told Global News that lunch breaks in particular have acted as superspreader events, since the workers are crammed into small trailers with no possibility for social distancing. "They fit six people to a table and six tables per lunch trailer," explained one worker. "Thirty-six workers in a trailer. That is the exact situation my shift was forced to (endure) as well."

Despite the extremely dangerous conditions, many workers have no choice but to risk their lives in order to make ends meet. Many are working a 12 days-on and two days-off rotation, meaning they remain at camp even when off work. Workers who display symptoms or whose test comes back positive must remain at the isolation wing of the camp, where they do not receive adequate care or

even follow-up from medical professionals.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed Greg, a veteran of oilsands camp work, who explained the conditions confronting tens of thousands of workers throughout Alberta's highly-profitable energy sector. "It's important that the public knows that outbreaks like at CNRL Horizon or Cargill (meatpacking plants) are not some sort of anomaly," he said. "These are not accidents, but the inevitable result of the federal and provincial governments' callous back-to-work and herd immunity policies, dictated to them by the business elite."

"Currently I'm working on a new plastics plant in Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta, which has been labelled as 'essential' all throughout the pandemic. But Canada can get plenty of plastic from other plants domestically, or even import it. How can this company be allowed to put more than 2,000 workers and their families at risk for a redundant plastics plant that just generates more landfill? The only 'essential' thing about this plant is that it can accumulate profit for its wealthy investors, regardless of the cost to the working class."

As the WSWS previously reported, the COVID-19 outbreak at CNRL's Horizon site began last October. But as the company brought many more workers on site for its labour-intensive spring maintenance turnaround in April, the virus spread like wildfire through the camp, nearby communities, and even across Canada as workers returned home, infecting scores each day. Oilsands workers commute from across Alberta and many migrant workers fly in from and return to Newfoundland and the other Atlantic provinces.

Global News interviewed the distraught wife of a critically ill worker, a father of eight children, who caught COVID-19 while in the CNRL Horizon camp in April. Recounting an experience that has undoubtedly been shared by thousands more families, she explained, "This job was important to our family as COVID-19 resulted in my husband's place of work being shut down over a year ago. It has been difficult to find employment and so (when) this opportunity was given to him, we gratefully accepted."

Describing his condition in the camp after his infection, she said, "He was only able to speak in one- or two-word answers, so I asked him to call for medical help because he hadn't received medical check-ins, physical check-ins for seven days at that point."

The 51-year-old worker was subsequently evacuated to the University of Alberta hospital in Edmonton, where he was put on extracorporeal membrane oxygenation

(ECMO), a machine that pumps and oxygenates a patient's blood outside the body, allowing the heart and lungs to rest.

When Global News asked Alberta Federation of Labour President Gil McGowan for his reaction to the interview, he said he doesn't point the finger at oil companies for the dozens of COVID-19 outbreaks. He claimed, "The problem was that the provincial government had set the (COVID-19) standards too low" for workplaces.

These comments are breathtakingly cynical coming from an organization that from the spring of 2020 has appealed to the anti-worker UCP government to reopen the economy "safely" amid the worst pandemic in a century. This campaign, combined with the unions' steadfast opposition to any worker job action to shut down unsafe workplaces so as to save workers' health and lives, provided Kenney with the political cover he needed to eliminate any restrictions on the operations of big business—a move that was demanded and welcomed by the province's big oil companies in particular. That McGowan now seeks to whitewash the responsibility of these multi-billion dollar corporations for the disastrous conditions they have helped create in workplaces and for families across the province, all in the name of ensuring payouts to shareholders, underscores that his organization stands on the side of the bosses, not of working people.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges energy workers in Alberta to draw the necessary conclusions and take up the fight to build new organizations of struggle to combat the pandemic and save lives. Rank-and-file safety committees are urgently required at every workplace to wage a struggle for the shutdown of all nonessential production with full pay for all workers, the provision of the best safety equipment and health care to those workers who must continue on the job, and financial and social support for families until the pandemic is brought under control. These measures can be paid for by confiscating the vast sums of wealth hoarded by the major oil companies and their super-rich shareholders, as part of a worker-led counter-offensive to place the protection of workers' health and very lives ahead of the accumulation of private profit.



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