

Construction unions complicit in Ontario's devastating COVID-19 third wave

James Clayton
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Workers in Ontario's construction industry and related trades are being sacrificed to COVID-19 in order to keep profits flowing in Canada's speculative real estate frenzy. House prices have surged 35 percent in Canada's most populous province just in the past year.

Official COVID-19 statistics on Ontario's construction sector dramatically understate the pandemic's impact. Many thousands of infections can likely be traced back to Ontario's frenetic construction sites, which have been declared an "essential service" by the province's Doug Ford-led Conservative government.

Earlier this month, more than 60 workers and their family members in Kingston, a small city between Toronto and Montreal, contracted COVID-19 at the All Seniors Long Term Care construction site. Ultimately, the Ministry of Labour was forced to close the site, at which more than 900 workers and subcontractors were working.

Construction site outbreaks have also recently occurred at multiple sites run by, among others, Ellis Don, Commonwealth Plywood, REA Construction and Reliance Construction, as well as a condo project run by Menkes Developments.

The nature of many construction tasks requires long periods of work in close proximity to others, and the consecutive handling of tools and materials by multiple workers. Moreover, many construction sites are worked by hundreds or even thousands of workers at any given time, including numerous transient contractors, leading to all sorts of social and work interactions which can lead to COVID-19 transmission.

Poor workplace record-keeping and the government's failure to invest in systematic contact-tracing makes tracing most COVID-19 cases back to construction sites, or any workplace for that matter, extremely difficult. Public Health Ontario's data on how the virus is transmitted demonstrates the relative ineffectiveness of Ontario's contact-tracing efforts. Take the "Close Contact" category in the graph below: it doesn't tell us anything that is not already obvious, and covers up the link between a great deal of social contact and workplace outbreaks.

What data there is on workplace outbreaks is also difficult to interpret. However, the fact that there were 240 ongoing workplace outbreaks as of May 21 indicates Ontario workers are in the midst of an unprecedented crisis that threatens their health and lives and those of their families and friends.

Public Health Ontario's COVID-19 data portal only separates workplace outbreaks into "farm," "food processing" and "other

workplaces." Its data shows more than 4,320 COVID cases at "other workplaces," which includes construction. These account only for infected workers, not infections due to social contacts those workers may have had. Thus the actual impact from workplace transmission is far greater than it appears on the surface.

The government workplace data, it need be added, doesn't include outbreaks at schools, day cares and health and care facilities, although these are workplaces and many of those who have become infected, and in far too many cases die, are health workers, care-givers and teachers.

Statistics from Ontario's Workplace Safety & Insurance Board (WSIB) indicate that the agency responsible for providing wage-loss benefits due to work-related injury or illness has accepted between 950 and 1,969 claims due to COVID infection in construction and related manufacturing and property management industries. Cases originating in construction are mixed in with cases in food and beverage manufacture, administration services, etc. Using the WSIB data, the construction industry is responsible for between 8 percent and 17 percent of COVID-19-related WSIB sickness claims. Like the Public Health data, these figures exclude infections among family members and other social contacts the workers had.

The intentionally confusing and vague manner in which the Province of Ontario presents its COVID-19 data is an integral part of the ruling class's campaign to justify the rapid easing of public health measures and the opening up of the economy. The Ontario government doesn't want to know and doesn't care about the extent of COVID-19 transmission in workplaces, and from there to working-class families. It doesn't want the public to know either.

All of these totally preventable COVID-19 infections are seen as the "cost of doing business."

In the ongoing drive to keep workers churning out profits for construction and related industries, the construction unions, which "represent" 37 percent of Ontario's construction workers, have set a filthy example by their complicity in this "profits before lives" agenda.

The Ontario Building and Construction Trades Council, which represents 150,000 workers in 13 different craft unions mostly engaged in large public/private infrastructure construction, has both praised and cooperated with government and corporate efforts to create a series of utterly inadequate "safety protocols" for Ontario construction sites. The chief goal of these measures is to

maintain the operation of “essential construction,” irrespective of infection levels. The weak officially-mandated safety protocols, which include mask wearing, social distancing and the frequent cleaning of surfaces, are followed to varying degrees. In many instances the “measures” taken consist simply of keeping the required paperwork on site, for inspection by the Ontario Ministry of Labour.

Behind the job site gates, work largely continues on as before. And the work is unsafe. Following the Kingston outbreak, the chief medical officer of health for the region, Dr. Kieran Moore, claimed “the rules were followed” and that “the company has kept accurate records of all workers on site.” Clearly “the rules” do not stop COVID-19 transmission!

Under pressure from rank-and-file workers, the Carpenters’ District Council of Ontario issued a single toothless demand back in March 2020, when the pandemic was first exploding, for the Ontario government to temporarily halt all construction. Since then it has helped draft and adapted itself to the very safety protocols which continue to fail construction workers, and was among the unions that were supposed to be safeguarding workers’ rights and safety at the Kingston All Seniors Long Term Care building site.

With more than 50,000 members in the Greater Toronto area, Labourer’s International Union of North America (LiUNA) Local 183 is the largest construction local in North America. But when it comes to defending workers’ interests it is a fat zero, refusing to fight for a shutdown of the industry or even sites where there are major outbreaks. The most Local 183 “leader” Jack Oliveira has been able to muster is a pathetic appeal for “more health and safety inspectors.” This appeal is addressed to the same Ford government that cut \$16 million from the Ministry of Labour office tasked with preventing workplace deaths in 2019.

Neither LiUNA nor the Ford Government are truly interested in preventing COVID-19 infections in construction; their concern is keep the profits flowing. LiUNA itself operates a multi-billion dollar property development business with a \$180 billion portfolio of investments in the capitalist economy.

The record of the Ministry of Labour on COVID-19 inspections demonstrates the totally toothless and fraudulent nature of its inspections. Up to March 24, the Ministry had issued 30,000 COVID-19 related orders at workplaces, but unsafe work was only stopped 80 times. Given the notorious infrequency of workplace inspections, these orders barely scratch the surface of the terrible working conditions across the province. The number of work-orders is itself an indicator of the gravity of the health and safety issues at construction sites and other workplaces.

The call for “more inspections” is therefore just a political cover up to permit LiUNA and the large construction corporations to which it is tied to pretend that Ontario construction sites are safe so that profits can be made.

LiUNA Local 183 is only interested in strikes to the extent they further its business interests. It recently withdrew its bricklayers from several large residential subdivision projects—not out of concerns for workers’ health in the midst of the worst public health crisis in a century, but in an attempt to force out stucco trades who either had no union affiliation or were affiliated with a competitive union.

The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) has likewise become the direct partner of the industrial giants from whom they are supposed to protect their members. Far from calling for a shutdown of unsafe workplaces, the IBEW, together with Plan Group, one of the largest construction firms in the country, purchased a public relations “advertorial” in the *National Post* in which they bragged about their online COVID-19 awareness training course. This pathetic farce is no different than many of the absolutely worthless online occupational health and safety training courses, such as Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) or Working at Heights, which workers can pass with minimal effort and then be cleared for dangerous, even life-threatening work. This training is totally inadequate, and designed to protect the liability of the employer, not the life of the worker. Every worker who passes the new IBEW-sponsored online test receives a “COVID Aware” sticker for their hardhat.

Such stunts are clearly designed not to protect worker health and safety, but rather are a public relations exercise to cover up the essentially corporatist nature of the unions and justify their complicity in forcing workers into unsafe workplaces.

Construction workers looking to secure safe working conditions and protect themselves and their loved ones from the deadly virus must break politically and organizationally with the trade unions, which, over the past four decades, have abandoned all traditions of independent working class struggle and become ever more integrated with big business and the state. Workers need to build new organizations of struggle, workplace rank-and-file safety committees, to fight for demands like the closure of all nonessential workplaces with full pay for every worker until the pandemic is brought under control, and the provision of the very best safety equipment and health care for those workers who are genuinely essential and must continue to work. These demands could be funded many times over by seizing the vast wealth hoarded by real estate speculators, property companies, the major banks and the financial oligarchy.

We urge all workers who agree with this program to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* today for assistance in establishing a rank-and-file committee at your workplace.



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