

At least 127 Delta variant cases in Ontario linked to massive COVID-19 outbreak at Nunavut mine

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A major COVID-19 outbreak that has developed over the past two months at a mine in Canada's far north has once again laid bare the disastrous consequences of the ruling elite's "profits before lives" policy during the pandemic. The refusal to allow serious public health measures to impinge on the accumulation of corporate profits has resulted not only in scores of miners getting sick. It has also led to hundreds of additional infections in Canadian provinces to the south.

COVID-19 began to spread among workers at the Nunavut Territory's Mary River Mine on April 19, and by May 5 the outbreak had become so severe that the mine was forced to suspend its operations.

One of the northernmost mines in the world, the open-pit iron ore mine is located in the Qikiqtani region of Baffin Island. Workers fly in and out of the remote site as part of a three-week shift rotation, and approximately 800 workers are located at the mine at any given time.

Among the initial three cases of COVID-19 detected, two workers tested positive for variants of concern. One worker had the B.1.1.7 strain, and on April 30 another was confirmed to have contracted the Delta variant.

The fact that the highly transmissible Delta strain, first identified in India, had been detected among the mine workforce was not made publicly known in the company's May 2 press release announcing the outbreak. Consequently, the number of Delta variant cases rapidly mushroomed. As of June 12, there were 106 confirmed cases of mineworkers contracting the virus, and 96 of these are of the Delta variant.

According to International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 793 spokesperson Mike Gallagher, one worker has died. Another is recovering after being hospitalized due to the virus. Currently, the Mary River Mine outbreak is one of the largest known

outbreaks of the Delta variant to have occurred in Canada.

Baffinland Iron Mines Corporation, which operates the mine, used its own staff to carry out contact-tracing measures throughout the outbreak. Workers deemed "by the company as low risk" were allowed to fly out of the site and travel home when operations came to a halt. As a result, 1,200 workers returned to their homes, located in every province and territory across Canada. Many of these workers have unwittingly carried the COVID-19 virus and its dangerous and partially vaccine-resistant Delta variant into their home communities.

Nunavut's chief public health officer, Dr. Michael Patterson, announced that the province is aware of cases directly linked to the mine outbreak in Ontario, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Newfoundland and Labrador, and New Brunswick.

Over 400 workers went back to their homes in Ontario. Flight manifests retrieved by Nunavut Public Health show that the workers flew into airports in all 34 of the province's health jurisdictions.

As of June 12, 127 COVID-19 cases in Ontario had been linked to the Mary River Mine outbreak, and it is known that 10 of these are of the B.1.617 lineage, which includes the Delta variant.

Similarly, in Alberta, 120 cases are currently linked to the mine and at least 9 of those are confirmed to be Delta cases.

Ontario's associate chief medical officer of health, Dr. Barbara Yaffe, stated in a press conference that mineworkers who had been exposed to the virus and had since travelled home "may not be aware of their high-risk status." Dr. Yaffe's May 31 remarks were among the first time public health authorities issued specific warnings about the Mary River Mine outbreak to the public or even their counterparts. Neither Baffinland management nor

Nunavut's health authorities notified the provinces to which workers were rapidly returning.

Health officials in Ontario only became aware of the outbreak when Ottawa Public Health alerted them of the potential dangers of the situation on May 7. Even following this, it wasn't until May 25 that local Ontario health units were informed that all returning workers from Baffinland should be considered high-risk. All public health units in Ontario have now issued warnings to their residents and requested that anybody who visited the mine since April 30 self-isolate, notify public health and seek testing.

Speaking to the *Toronto Star*, IUOE spokesperson Mike Gallagher defended Baffinland, stating that the union has "no idea" how the virus spread and feels the company took extensive health and safety precautions. "In a typical three-week work shift, employees are tested about five times. All the expected PPE (personal protective equipment) is supplied and physical distancing (in place)," Gallagher told the *Star*. "The camp has one person to a room and the air ducts were capped to prevent airborne transmission."

Scandalously, Gallagher provided this whitewash of the company's role in the same interview in which he reported that a miner had died from COVID-19. But the union's full-throated defence of a corporation that continued to operate full-throttle during a pandemic in pursuit of profit should come as no surprise. Throughout all economic sectors, from Canada's auto industry to public schools and food processing plants, the unions have acted as the chief enforcers of the ruling class' open economy/open schools policy, which has led to over 1 million infections and tens of thousands of deaths. Striking miners at Vale's Sudbury operations have reported to the *World Socialist Web Site* that the United Steelworkers (USW) collaborated with the Brazil-based multinational to cover up major COVID-19 outbreaks at their highly profitable nickel mining operations.

Dr. David Fisman, an epidemiologist at the University of Toronto's Dalla Lana School of Public Health who has publicly voiced concerns that major dangers are posed by Ontario's rush to reopen, called into question Baffinland's attempts at stopping airborne transmission. "With aerosol, where it's infection via shared air ... a lot of those public health guidelines being used to assess risk fall apart," he said in a recent interview with the *Star*.

Fisman believes that the "arbitrary definitions of risk" employed in public health restrictions aren't effective when airborne transmission is considered. He also

questions whether or not airborne transmission was factored in when the company's contact-tracers deemed that workers could be sent home as "low-risk."

The company defended by the IUOE union has endangered not just its own workers, but communities across the entire country. The consequences of its drive to obtain every last possible dollar during a global health crisis are far-reaching; the lives, livelihoods, health and families of Canadians in every province and territory have been put at risk.

The Baffinland Iron Mines Corporation is jointly owned by the Texas-based Energy and Minerals Group and ArcelorMittal.

In May, 2,500 ArcelorMittal workers went on strike in northeastern Quebec after workers had overwhelmingly rejected a USW-endorsed concessionary agreement. The union promptly ended the strike, sidelining important issues, after four weeks, when the company, seeking to exploit record high iron prices, offered modest improvements to the financial package.

Transnational giant ArcelorMittal is the world's second-largest steel producer and the world's 120th largest company. It earned net profits of almost US \$2.3 billion in the first three months of 2021 alone, an increase of more than \$1 billion over the \$1.2 billion profit that it made in the last quarter of 2020.

ArcelorMittal's interests could not lie further from the health and safety of their workers, whether they labor in its Canadian Arctic archipelago iron mine or in its iron mines, port facilities, offices and rail lines in northeastern Quebec.

The disastrous consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak at Mary River mine underscore the urgency of workers building rank-and-file safety committees independent of and in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions, which are fully complicit in the ruling elite's policy of mass infection and death. Rank-and-file safety committees must be fought for in every workplace to wage a struggle to shut down all nonessential production with full pay for all workers, until the pandemic is truly brought under control. Such measures could easily be funded with the vast amounts of wealth hoarded by companies like ArcelorMittal.



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