

Canada's meatpacking workers face dangerous conditions and ruthless exploitation

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Strikes in recent months at Olymel and Exceldor slaughterhouses in Quebec have highlighted the terrible conditions in which meatpacking workers in Canada operate, as well as their growing determination to fight against these conditions.

Faced with increased competition in international markets, which consume 50 percent of the beef and 70 percent of the pork produced in Canada, the big meat companies, like Cargill, Olymel and Maple Leaf, have consolidated their operations into ever-larger plants in order to reduce production costs.

While there were 235 slaughterhouses in Ontario in the early 2000s, there are now only 120. According to a 2009 report by the Food Processing Labour Sectoral Committee, “from 1995 to 2007, the proportion of hogs slaughtered in all of Canada by the four largest plants increased from 77 percent to 90 percent.”

This concentration of production is even more significant in the beef industry, where two plants, Cargill in High River and JBS in Brooks, both in Alberta, account for 70 percent of beef processed in the country. If you add Cargill's Guelph, Ontario plant, that figure rises to 85 percent.

At the same time, there has been an ever-intensifying assault on meatpacking workers, who have had major concessions imposed on them in contract after contract, making conditions in the industry increasingly intolerable.

According to Statistics Canada, the average wage in the meatpacking industry was \$21.51/per hour in 2019. Many workers earn less than this grossly inadequate wage. For example, the hourly rate was \$20.10 at Cargill after three years of service in 2019, and it was just \$14.85 after two years for Class 1 workers at

duBreton.

In recent years, workers have been subjected to wage freezes and outright pay cuts, with the result that a significant proportion of workers now need a second and even third job to support themselves and their families.

The conditions in the meat processing plants are among the worst imaginable. Workers work in a wet and cold environment with large temperature variation. The smell of blood and animal waste is omnipresent.

The slaughter industry has the usual hazards associated with heavy manufacturing and manual labor. Added to this are the physical and biological hazards inherent in handling stressed animals about to be slaughtered.

These conditions, combined with ever-increasing production quotas, result in high workplace accident and injury rates. Data from the province of Alberta, for example, shows that the manufacturing sector had the third-highest rate of injuries in 2019, with the largest proportion (19 percent) involving meat processing and packaging. Among the worst plants was Olymel's Red Deer, Alberta plant, which had 283 injuries in 2019 and 248 injuries in 2020.

The arduous conditions that prevail in slaughterhouses lead to high turnover and understaffing, resulting in overwork for those employed in the industry. Even before the pandemic, there were 28,000 vacancies nationwide. To fill this labor shortage, companies are turning to temporary foreign workers, one of the most exploited sections of the working class.

According to Canada's Department of Employment and Social Development, the governments of Justin

Trudeau in Ottawa and François Legault in Quebec launched a pilot project in early August that calls for “a 10 to 20 percent increase in the maximum number of temporary foreign workers employed in low-wage positions.”

A temporary foreign worker’s right to remain in Canada depends on their keeping the job with the employer named on their work permit. This reality makes it almost impossible for foreign workers to challenge horrendous working conditions. In addition to receiving lower wages than their Canadian counterparts, they often live in crowded conditions. Some are employed by employment agencies that pay them less than the “regular” workforce and fail to provide proper training to avoid injury.

The pandemic has been particularly difficult for these workers because of their precarious status. As infections increased in the factories, fear of the virus was combined with fear of protesting their conditions and having their employers terminate their contracts. During temporary closures, foreign workers were often abandoned. At duBreton in Rivière-du-Loup, Quebec, during a temporary closure due to an outbreak, the employer reportedly went so far as to tell some foreign workers, who had no money to eat, to go to a food bank.

Meat industry workers have been the victims of such callous disregard throughout the pandemic.

Meat processing plants are ideal environments for airborne virus transmission, as is the case with COVID-19, because of their cold, damp environment. In addition, because of the way the facilities are designed and how space is allocated to allow for assembly line work, distancing is nearly impossible. Despite these significant hazard factors, so-called “essential workers” were forced to work in crowded factories without any protection throughout the first wave of the pandemic.

Following the May 2020 award of \$77 million in federal grants to “help protect” workers, the meat industry—which never shut down its plants—used the government’s back-to-work policies to bring production back to pre-pandemic levels.

As all levels of government abandoned the most minimal measures to limit the spread of the virus, workers were forced to put their lives at risk to fatten the bosses’ stock portfolios.

In the next two pandemic waves, companies hid infections in factories and tried to blame workers when they contracted the disease. Press reports have revealed that some companies insisted workers who had been in contact with the virus return to their jobs while they were waiting for test results or had not completed their quarantine.

After a year and a half of the pandemic, thousands of meat processing workers have contracted COVID-19. At Cargill High River alone, an outbreak in late April and early May 2020 infected 949 of the plant’s 2,000 workers. Authorities said the outbreak was responsible for more than 1,550 additional cases.

Hundreds of workers had to be hospitalized, many of whom will retain long-term effects from the disease. There were also more than a dozen deaths among workers or their families, including three at Olymel in Red Deer, three at Cargill in High River and one at Olymel in Vallée-Jonction, Quebec.

This human and social catastrophe unfolded with the full complicity of the pro-capitalist unions. While workers demanded protective measures and equipment and the closure of plants unable to guarantee their safety, the unions constantly suppressed their opposition. They actively collaborated with employers and governments to keep factories open that had become death traps and denounced calls for job action as “illegal.”



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