

As class battle looms at major Canadian meatpacking plant, UFCW announces deal with food giant Cargill

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United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 401 announced yesterday afternoon that it has reached a tentative five-year contract settlement covering 2,000 meatpackers at Cargill's High River, Alberta beef processing plant.

The agreement, which the union claims is a “dramatic improvement” from a company contract proposal that workers overwhelmingly rejected last week, is in reality aimed at averting a looming class battle between the High River plant's brutally exploited workforce and the highly profitable multinational food giant.

After workers signalled their readiness to launch strike action next week, Cargill announced that it would impose a “complete” lockout at 12:01 am December 6 and stepped up preparations to deploy scabs to break workers' resistance, including by fencing off the entire facility.

Cargill has been advertising for replacement workers, including on Calgary public transit, and readying buses to transport scabs into the plant—a practice that is entirely legal under Alberta's reactionary labour laws.

The UFCW has refused to release anything more than a few self-selected “highlights” of the proposed agreement. However, those that are available and the UFCW's long and notorious record of imposing concessions contracts and suppressing worker opposition to unsafe working conditions strongly suggest that the tentative settlement is a sellout that will do little, if anything, to address workers' lengthy list of grievances.

This, moreover, under conditions where workers are in a powerful position, if they make a strike against Cargill the spearhead of a mass working class struggle for decent-paying, safe jobs for all. The High River facility accounts for 40 percent of Canada's beef supply. Any job action would, therefore, have a significant impact on supply chains that have already been battered by almost two years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Just last week, Cargill workers decisively repudiated a company contract proposal by a resounding 98 percent.

According to a message posted on the Local 401 website, the company has raised its wage offer from 19 percent to 21 percent over five years—which under current conditions, with inflation rising by 4.7 percent annually, still means a real-terms pay cut. The union is also boasting that the company has agreed to raise \$1,200 in signing and COVID-19 bonuses to \$2000, provide “improved health benefits” and unspecified contract provisions that will “facilitate a new culture of health, safety, dignity, and respect in the workplace.”

If news reports are correct, the UFCW intends to hold ratification votes over three days starting today. This means workers will have no

chance to seriously study the agreement and discuss it among themselves. On the basis of this anti-democratic charade alone, they should vote “No.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* will provide more information on the proposed agreement as it becomes available and encourages workers to contact us with their concerns.

The pandemic has exacted a terrible toll on the Cargill workers, and improved safety, including from infection by COVID-19, is one of their central demands.

The High River plant was the site of the largest COVID-19 outbreak in North America during the first wave of the pandemic in the spring of 2020. At least 950 workers—about half of the workforce—were infected and two died. Another close contact, a relative visiting from the Philippines, also perished. The RCMP is currently conducting a criminal investigation into the death of Benito Quesada, 51, a Mexican immigrant who left behind a wife and four children. No news about the progress of this investigation has been made public since it was announced last January.

When demands for social distancing grew in the plant during the massive outbreak, Cargill responded by laying off half the workforce on April 14, 2020. The following day a provincial inspector said the plant passed inspection, even though he never set foot in the facility and only saw it via FaceTime. Shortly thereafter, the plant was forced to close for two weeks.

The company, public health officials, and Alberta's right-wing, Jason Kenney-led United Conservative Party (UCP) government colluded to force workers back to work with only the most minimal safety precautions, such as the ubiquitous plexiglass shields that are less than useless against an airborne pathogen. The humid, “elbow to elbow” work environment, where workers are crammed onto the shop floor like sardines, is ideal for the transmission of SARS-CoV-2. Polling conducted by the UFCW last spring indicated that at least 85 percent of the plant's employees were fearful of returning to the plant.

The main reason why Cargill management was able to restart production in the face of such strong opposition was the UFCW's determination to force workers back into the plant, irrespective of the cost in human life. Thomas Hesse, the president of the UFCW Local 401, made some criticisms of Cargill for not listening to the union's safety proposals concerning masking and other measures. However, when he was asked by the corporate media if any job action would be countenanced, he said, “We are looking at legal options. We are not asking for a work stoppage. A work stoppage would not be legal.”

Hesse's remark underscored that for the privileged trade union

bureaucracy protecting the “legal” rules that regulate their cozy relationships with corporate management and the state is more important than defending the health and very lives of the workers they falsely claim to represent.

A majority of the workforce at the High River Plant consists of recruits from the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. According to its website, the Cargill High River plant was one of the pioneers of recruiting foreign workers under the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. This government-business scheme enables corporations to ruthlessly exploit foreign workers, whose status in Canada is entirely dependent on their employer. Their precarious status makes it all but impossible for temporary foreign workers to raise concerns about working conditions, let alone take up a struggle against them.

At least 1,000 of the workers at the High River plant are from the Philippines, Vietnam, and Mexico.

Given the brutal conditions under which these highly exploited workers are forced to labour, with the literal threat of being thrown out of the country hanging over their heads, a strike against the multi-billion-dollar conglomerate would send a powerful message. It would be met with strong sympathy from food processing workers in Alberta, across Canada, and internationally, who have first-hand experience of being treated as dispensable by management throughout the pandemic. At Olymel’s Red Deer, Alberta facility, at least three workers died in a massive outbreak earlier this year. At the Tyson Foods pork plant in Waterloo, Iowa, managers organized a betting pool so they could place wagers on how many workers would get infected by COVID-19. By the time the scandal broke in November 2020, over 1,000 workers were infected at the plant, five of whom were dead.

Just over two months ago, Alberta’s intensive care units were overflowing as infections and deaths skyrocketed due to the Kenney government’s murderous decision to lift all pandemic restrictions. This “herd immunity” policy provoked demonstrations across the province organized outside of the control of the unions, all of which have supported the reopening of the economy. Many of those who protested against Kenney would enthusiastically support a strike at Cargill. Industrial workers across the United States and Canada who have rebelled against the unions over recent months to wage courageous struggles at companies like John Deere, Volvo Trucks, and Vale, would follow suit.

Precisely because the Cargill High River workers are in a powerful position and would enjoy widespread support if they walked out, the UFCW is trying to strangle a strike before it even begins.

The UFCW’s bitter hostility to any genuine struggle by workers for improved wages and conditions was underscored in October by their sabotage of job action by 10,000 Real Canadian Superstore grocery workers in Alberta. Following an overwhelming 97 percent vote in favour of a strike by the low-paid, largely part-time workers, who have risked their lives in dangerous workplaces throughout the pandemic, UFCW Local 401 issued a public diatribe against all job action.

In what amounted to an ultimatum to the workers, UFCW Local 401 wrote under the revealing headline “Strike or settle,” “What a strike against Superstore would look like is difficult to predict. But any strike in this economy, and in the era of COVID-19, can reasonably be assumed to have the following characteristics: it will be long, difficult, demanding, and ridden with conflict and emotion.

“At any point, the Alberta government could intervene, and bad labour laws could result in prohibiting the strike or severely limiting

your ability to picket. The government may choose to stop you from striking altogether by calling your work ‘essential’ and claiming a work stoppage cannot be allowed in the current environment.

“Further, your union has conducted a market survey on customer attitudes through Environics Research. Customer support is critical to a successful retail strike. The data the survey provided is preliminary, but suggests that customer support is unpredictable, if only because many Superstore customers don’t know anything about the issues. Customers tend to be motivated by the price of the goods.”

Summing up the cynical outlook that pervades the union bureaucracy towards working people, UFCW Local 401 Secretary Treasurer Richelle Stewart declared at the time, “Ironically, the point of taking a strike vote is to attempt to avoid a strike.”

Local 401, which represents both the Superstore and Cargill workers, has a membership of over 30,000, making the UFCW the largest private sector union in Alberta. But as far as Hesse and his fellow well-paid bureaucrats are concerned, the only thing this mass membership is good for is paying union dues. Nothing would terrify these ladies and gentlemen more than an appeal to mobilize UFCW Local 401’s entire membership, together with workers throughout Alberta and across North America in an industrial and political offensive against Cargill and their backers in the Kenney government.

The UFCW’s record makes it abundantly clear that no serious struggle can be waged by Cargill workers through it and more generally through the corporatist unions that comprise the Alberta Federation of Labour and Canadian Labour Congress. If they are to prevail, Cargill workers must establish a rank-and-file strike committee to take control of their struggle out of the hands of UFCW bureaucrats, who function as nothing more than Cargill’s partners in crime. They must prepare to defy not only Cargill’s strikebreaking and the UFCW’s sabotage, but also the onslaught from the hard-right Kenney government. This requires above all an appeal for support from the widest sections of the working class across Canada and internationally for a joint a worker-led counteroffensive for safe workplaces, decent wages, and a strategy aimed at the global elimination of COVID-19.



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