

# Suncor celebrated as one of Canada's “top employers” despite monstrous record of worker injury and death

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Less than a month after Canada's Mediaworld named Suncor Energy one of the country's “top employers,” the Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Offshore Petroleum Board accused the oil and gas giant of yet another serious safety violation—this time at an oil rig in the Terra Nova field in Newfoundland's Grand Banks.

A federal-provincial regulatory agency, the Petroleum Board has charged Suncor for transgressions that led to a Dec. 2019 accident that forced the helicopter medivac (medical evacuation) of a worker injured from a fall. The violations cited include, failing to ensure that all workers were using harnesses secured to a lifeline, were wearing appropriate protective equipment and had signed a compliance report.

One of Canada's most profitable corporations, Suncor's operations are the site of frequent, often fatal, accidents. The company has also regularly been cited by various authorities across the country for wantonly violating environmental protection regulations.

Suncor lawyers will appear in a Newfoundland court in January to respond to the charges arising from the 2019 accident.

Mediaworld Canada Inc. advertises itself as “the nation's largest publisher of quality employment periodicals, reaching over 15 million Canadians each year.” Nowhere, though, in the company's prospectus does it mention that Mediaworld plays an important role in rehabilitating the tarnished images of corporate miscreants.

Just days before Mediaworld's corporate feel-good list hit the pages of the *Globe and Mail*, Canada's pre-eminent mouthpiece for big business, a November 12 explosion at Suncor's Tamarack gas field in northern Alberta killed 2 workers.

Since 2014, fifteen workers have perished in various

industrial accidents while working at Suncor operations with many others injured. This includes five fatalities in just the last 12 months.

By the beginning of 2022, members of Suncor's Board of Directors as well as shareholders were expressing concern about the continuing workplace accidents and other operational “mishaps.” But not because of their impact on workers' health and lives .

The accidents were resulting in downtime, causing the company to miss production targets, accrue reduced profits, and pay out smaller stock dividends. When another worker was killed on the job in July, CEO Mark Little, seeing the writing on the wall, immediately tendered his resignation.

At the time, Suncor's board tried their best to massage the public relations nightmare. Nonetheless, it could not avoid admitting in *corporate-speak* straight out of the Ted Rogers School of Management, that the company had “fallen short” in “achieving safety and operational excellence.”

None of this caused the corporate public relations machines and big business media that feed and promote the loathsome “Best Employer” lists to miss so much as a heart-beat. Despite Suncor's abysmal and worsening occupational health and safety record, Mediaworld hailed Suncor for the third consecutive year as one of Canada's best employers, naming it to its “top employer for 2023” list.

Last year's selection of Suncor prompted Professor Sean Tucker, a University of Regina occupational health and safety expert, to write Mediaworld and the *Globe and Mail*, which publishes the annual list. He wanted to draw their attention to the disconnect between their praise and promotion of Suncor and its record of indifference and malfeasance vis a vis the health and well-being of its

workers and those employed by its numerous subcontractors.

*Globe* publisher Philip Crawley responded by saying that he would discuss the matter with Mediacorp. For his part, Mediacorp CEO Anthony Meehan reportedly told Tucker that occupational health and safety falls outside the criteria used to choose the companies that workers should be most excited about working for.

True to form, the information Tucker provided on Suncor's monstrous safety record had zero impact on Mediacorp's selections as evidenced by the energy giant's inclusion in its 2023 list.

*Globe* publisher Crawley, meanwhile, felt compelled to try to put some distance between Canada's purported newspaper of record and Mediacorp, given its brazen indifference to workers' health and safety and the phony, *Globe*-hyped doctrine of "corporate responsibility."

Crawley pleaded that his newspaper only sponsors and prints Mediacorp's annual list but does not directly participate in the selection process.

Lest it be thought that Mediacorp and the *Globe* have a particular soft-spot for Suncor, it should be pointed out that Cargill was selected for Mediacorp's 2021 "Top Employer" list, after a year in which the company systematically exposed workers at its meatpacking plants to the potentially lethal COVID-19 virus.

Especially egregious were the events at Cargill's High River, Alberta plant, where close to a thousand low-wage workers, many of them immigrants or temporary foreign workers, became infected during the pandemic's first wave. As infections snowballed in March and early April 2020, the company insisted on keeping its High River plant operating at full tilt, with the complicity of government labour inspectors and public health officials.

When an inspection was finally done on April 15, 2020, the assigned official did not even enter the main part of the shop floor, scandalously preferring to stay outside the facility and inspect it via a FaceTime app. Management did not object, then cited the inspector's "clean bill of health" to pressure workers to remain on the job.

Worker complaints of inadequate safety equipment and unsafe working conditions were ignored. Management also refused to implement worker suggestions for more spacing. Before it was all over, 950 of the 2,000 workers fell ill and dozens were hospitalized. 600 family, friends and other close contacts of the workers also contracted the virus. Three Cargill workers and at least one family member were killed by the pandemic. Workers in other company slaughterhouses were similarly afflicted.

If keeping all of one's limbs, avoiding hospitalization and returning home alive after a shift at work are not valid criteria for workplace "excellence," then what is?

"Best Companies to Work For" lists are ubiquitous in the corporate world. Magazines announcing the cream of the crop litter the coffee tables in executive suites, human resources offices and at head-hunters' offices across the globe. A handful of global companies produce the checkbox questionnaires that are filled out by corporate managers eager to secure for their company some positive spin, even if often only after paying a requisite entry fee. Although these surveys are presented as representing the company as a whole, normally only the conditions at the company's office headquarters are rated.

Soothing pastels for office wall colourings are deemed particularly progressive. So too increasingly are a gender and racially "diverse" board of directors. Ergonomic chairs are a plus, but occurrences of carpal tunnel or stress illnesses are not counted. The presence of pool tables in break rooms and occasional lunchtime pizza parties are highly regarded. Such "office culture" ratings, however, do not prevent this or that "Top Employer" from featuring in their advertising materials highly-posed photos of smiling workers in their factories, mines, warehouses and oil rigs.

Workers slaving on the warehouse floor at Amazon, fighting for even meager benefits at Starbucks, sleeping in their cars to make an onerous shift at Walmart or selling electronics made by Foxconn sweatshop workers for Apple, Samsung, Microsoft, or Dell will be surprised—to say the least—to learn that their employers are so darn exemplary. As the class struggle intensifies in 2023 and beyond, they will no doubt make their own sentiments about such employers known and in ways that will leave an indelible mark.



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