

With 1 worker dead, Michigan paper mill still running amid fungal outbreak

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Are you a Billerud worker or Escanaba resident? Contact us using the form at the end of this article to expose what is happening and to get help building a rank-and-file committee to put workers in control of safety.

A worker at the Billerud paper mill in Escanaba, Michigan, has now died as a result of the ongoing fungal outbreak at the mill. The mill employs over 800 workers in Michigan's rural Upper Peninsula.

Though the outbreak was detected over a month ago, all workers were kept on the job by Billerud and the United Steel Workers union (USW) until after the first death was reported. Then on Friday, April 14, the company and local health officials announced plans to "idle" the plant in the next week for cleaning.

But the *World Socialist Web Site* has learned that as of Tuesday, April 18, workers are still at the mill. A worker who was at the mill today informed our reporters that only "parts of the plant are idling."

At 97 probable cases and counting, this is apparently the largest blastomycosis outbreak in US history. Twelve people have been hospitalized. The deceased worker's name has not been released.

More workers could become sick in the coming weeks and months. Blastomycosis symptoms typically develop between three weeks and three months after infection.

Blastomycosis is a rare disease resulting from breathing microscopic fungal spores, which are found in decaying organic matter like wood or leaves. Once inside the lungs, the body's warmth and moisture can transform the spores into yeast that can stay in the lungs or be transferred through the bloodstream to other parts of the body, including the skin, bones, joints, organs, brain and spinal cord, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Treatment for blastomycosis includes antifungal medications, often requiring expensive courses lasting six months to a year.

And, as seen in the Billerud outbreak, blastomycosis can be deadly. Case fatality ranges between 4 percent and 78 percent, according to a 2014 study by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). If the fungal infection progresses and leads to Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS), the disease is almost certainly fatal, according to another study.

The risk is much higher for the immunocompromised. Given the high rates of COVID-19 infection across the country and its clear association with immune dysregulation, the morbidity and mortality of rates of blastomycosis are likely worse than before.

Billerud's representatives admit they were officially informed on March 3 by the Public Health, Delta & Menominee Counties (PHDM) after several workers were hospitalized for atypical pneumonia.

A team led by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) visited the mill on March 27 and 28 and "advised the use of N95 masks to reduce potential exposure," but production was allowed to continue.

USW Local 21 President Gerald Kell told *Upper Michigan Source* on March 29, "Everybody's interest is the same, and that's the health and safety of the employees at the mill."

Kell must take the workers for fools. Companies like Billerud are only interested in profit, as their response to the outbreak makes clear.

Paper production is big business, especially in the rural Upper Peninsula. The Billerud mill, with nearly 900 employees and many other contractors, is the largest manufacturing employer north of Midland in the state of Michigan and is immensely profitable.

The plant was acquired in April 2022 by BillerudKorsnäs—previously known as Verso—a Swedish pulp and paper company seeking to expand globally and increase its US-based market share. Verso shareholders took home \$27 per share, or approximately \$825 million, in the deal. As a result of the acquisition, BillerudKorsnäs is now one of the largest providers of virgin paper and packing materials internationally with combined net sales amounting to \$3.6 billion.

The plant was made attractive for corporate takeover by a series of cost-cutting measures implemented with the collusion of the USW and other unions at the mill. “Verso has successfully streamlined our operations and reduced costs,” a company spokesperson told the *Escanaba Daily Press* in December 2021.

In January of this year, the Michigan legislature approved a supplemental spending bill which provided a lavish handout to the plant, totaling around \$200 million for improvements. It was promptly signed by Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer.

A former subcontractor at the mill in Escanaba told the WSWs, “That place has appeared polluted since they opened. You should look at what the state says about eating fish from Little Bay de Noc.” He explained that the paper plant facilities include tanks which hold 300,000 gallons of chemicals with a pH of 13 or 14. “It’s more dangerous than bleach—up there with drain cleaner. The company I worked for would give us PPE every week because the stuff in the ground would eat through our clothing. It’s a pretty nasty environment. We were told, ‘If something drips on you, don’t look up.’”

Neither the USW nor the other unions at the plant, the Teamsters and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), have demanded the mill be closed and their members fully compensated until the factory is made safe.

In the early months of the pandemic in 2020, rank-and-file autoworkers conducted wildcat strikes in defiance of the United Auto Workers to force the shutdown of infected plants and to save lives. Billerud workers will have to take matters into their own hands too.

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