

Worker with 35 years at Canadian Coca-Cola distributor terminated following job injury

Steve Hill

14 May 2026

Days after making a splash in the local Calgary media by unveiling a new \$75 million state-of-the-art warehouse facility, Coke Canada Bottling unceremoniously axed a worker with 35 years at the company who was injured on the job—essentially crying poor.

Shawne Hopkins was terminated on the basis of the doctrine of “frustration of employment”—a legal term of which most workers are probably unaware. It can be invoked when there is no reasonable likelihood of an employee being able to return to work within a reasonable time after an unexpected situation occurs, such as an illness or injury.

Yet even if an employer makes the claim that an employment agreement has been “frustrated,” it does not release the employer from the obligation to comply with the Alberta Human Rights Act. According to the Alberta Human Rights Commission, “An employer cannot terminate, refuse to hire, or otherwise negatively impact an employee because of their disability, injury, or illness.” The employer is obligated to work with the employee and, “During the accommodation process, everyone must act reasonably and cooperatively in searching for and implementing accommodation.”

Hopkins’ fate is a glaring example of how Canada’s ruling class treats workers as disposable inputs for their profit-making operations who can be tossed aside at a moment’s notice, legal and other regulatory protections be damned.

The 57-year-old man from Airdrie, Alberta, was seriously injured on the job in January of 2024 when a 900 kg overhead sliding door malfunctioned as he was trying to open it. Hopkins’ shoulder joint was torn, and his arm and neck were also damaged, causing severe pain. He said that nothing was done by either his supervisor or the maintenance department after his repeated warnings of the hazard.

For two years, Hopkins endured multiple surgeries in an effort to repair the damage and get back to work. Then, in February of this year, he received a five-minute phone call notifying him that he was to be let go with no benefits and no severance. “Thirty-five years, not even a handshake,” Hopkins said.

Shortly after, Hopkins received a letter from the company stating: “after completing a thorough assessment of your permanent restrictions and available jobs/duties, we have

determined that Coke Canada Bottling is unable to provide accommodation to you without undue hardship to the company.”

The company offered a one-time lump sum payment of \$2,511.20 “in recognition” of Hopkins’ 35 years of service and to help him transition away from Coke Canada Bottling, on the condition that he sign a non-disclosure agreement and release the company from liability.

Hopkins declined the insulting offer.

In a statement to CBC News, Coke Canada Bottling said that “it takes its obligations toward injured employees seriously.” The company also said that “it works with WCB Alberta (the provincial Workers’ Compensation Board), medical professionals, outside specialists and union partners to determine what work an injured employee can perform—that may include both physical and desk roles.” More specifically, the company stated, “WCB Alberta is responsible for managing medical costs, providing wage replacement and helping injured workers retrain or find new jobs.”

What the company here cryptically refers to is the WCB’s role in “managing,” i.e., restricting, corporate exposure to medical costs and offering injured and sick workers a pittance by way of compensation. WCB Alberta accepted Hopkins’ claim and confirmed his injuries were caused by a “workplace hazard.” The WCB can pay injured workers about 90 percent of their average net earnings before injury if they cannot work, up to a yearly maximum until they are 65. And if a worker is forced to accept a lower-paying job due to medical limitations, the board may provide partial relief to make up the difference. But none of that is guaranteed. What is guaranteed is the injured worker will be faced with impairment, diminished earnings and reduced quality of life.

Hopkins, in fact, has been deemed “ready to work” by WCB Alberta—as he was given retraining to type with one hand—a ridiculous proposition from an agency that claims its “focus is to significantly and measurably reduce the impact of workplace illness and injury on Albertans.” It would be more accurate to say to “reduce the impact” on Albertan big business, since the decision regarding Hopkins’ ability to work deprives him of the possibility of accessing ongoing financial support.

For now, whether the fault for Shawne Hopkins’ ongoing

pain and uncertainty is the direct result of an avoidable incident that can legally be laid on his employer is for the courts to determine.

Hopkins' union, the Teamsters, performed its duties in characteristic perfunctory fashion, filing a grievance and hiring outside counsel for advice in a legal dispute whose adjudication could take many months, even years. The outcome will be very much dependent on the quality of legal representation he receives. Frequently, such cases result in a "compromise" that strongly favours the company. This is even true when workers die on the job, as shown at Hamilton, Ontario's National Steel Car plant, where owner Greg Aziz was fined a meagre \$650,000 after three workers died on the job within 18 months.

The priority of the union bureaucrats is to not upset their ongoing relationship with the company. In 2021, Teamsters Local Union 987 proudly hailed a collective agreement that provided a miserly 9 percent wage increase over a six-year term, just as inflation in Canada was skyrocketing following the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. The bureaucracy's role as an imposer of real wage cuts is par for the course in light of the entire union apparatus' integration with corporate management and the state over the past 40 years.

The claim by Coca-Cola Canada Bottling Limited that the company is unable to find an equivalent position within the organization for an employee of 35 years without assuming undue hardship is absurd.

With 6,000 employees in 5 production facilities and more than 50 distribution centres, Coke Canada is a major player in manufacturing across the country. The "proudly independent and family-owned" distributor of Coca-Cola products makes bold and visionary claims on its website: "At Coke Canada Bottling, we foster a supportive, collaborative, family-like culture where our people have opportunities to grow and develop through meaningful work in a fast-paced, dynamic work environment." It continues, "The 'behaviours we owe each other' guide us each day in how we act towards one another, our customers, consumers, communities, and stakeholders."

Formed in 2018 when a joint venture purchased Coke's Canadian bottling and distribution franchise, Coke Canada is an independent, privately held company owned by billionaires with extensive corporate connections—the Tanenbaum family and the descendants of Junior Bridgeman—and not part of the publicly traded Coca-Cola Company. Its annual revenues are estimated at \$3.3 billion.

Larry Tanenbaum is a Canadian businessman and board member of Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment (MLSE). He is also chairman of the board of the National Basketball Association, governor and member of the executive committee of the National Hockey League, the NBA, and Major League Soccer. Tanenbaum is also associated with multiple research institutes, universities, healthcare bodies and political organizations. In 2007, Tanenbaum was appointed an Officer of

the Order of Canada. His net worth is estimated above \$2 billion.

Junior Bridgeman, an American who died in 2025, was a former NBA basketball player. After his retirement, Bridgeman turned his attention to the fast food industry, eventually owning hundreds of outlets. He also acquired *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines. In 2016, *Forbes* ranked Bridgeman one of the wealthiest retired athletes in the world—just behind Michael Jordan, David Beckham and Arnold Palmer—with a net worth of over \$1.4 billion.

The wealth at the disposal of Tanenbaum and Bridgeman's heirs is far from exceptional among Canada's unaccountable and ever wealthier oligarchy. Oxfam Canada reported recently that the country's 89 billionaires grew their combined wealth by 20 percent during 2025 alone, translating into an increase of \$95 billion for the richest 40 billionaires. On the other side of the divide, poverty has risen steadily since 2020, and some 25 percent of Canadians live in food-insecure households.

In the celebrations for the grand opening of the new Calgary warehouse facility, Coke Canada President Tony Chow boasted about the company's first-ever automated storage and retrieval system.

Describing it as the "Crown Jewel," he promised there will still be room for human jobs too. Speaking to CTV News, Chow said, "We've got 500 employees here in this facility, and we're always upskilling." He continued, "(Workers) can actually run the new equipment that we are investing in and putting into this building. ... So the jobs that we have here are going to be in perpetuity."

In light of Hopkins' experience, Chow ought to have added, "And any worker who becomes a drain on our resources because of illness or injury can be substituted quicker than a spare part in our 'crown jewel'."

Coca-Cola Canada Bottling Limited and its owners could easily afford to accommodate the needs of a 35-year employee who was injured on the job—they just don't want to. The company's callous outlook typifies the standpoint of a billionaire oligarchy that views the working class as so much raw material for exploitation and disposal as needed. Workers can only secure safe working conditions and decent compensation for injuries by organizing independently of the pro-corporate union bureaucracies and waging a collective struggle for their class interests by building rank-and-file committees in every workplace to fight for social needs, not private profit, to take precedence.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact