

Industrial accident claims three lives in Leduc, Alberta

By Penny Smith
15 December 2018

A tragic workplace accident in the small Canadian town of Leduc, just south of Edmonton, Alberta, has claimed the lives of three workers. Just before 3PM on November 15th, emergency crews were called to a chemical-industrial site in the Leduc Business Park. Three men aged 31, 34, and 52 who worked there were declared dead soon after.

Little information has been released about the circumstances surrounding the fatalities. Alberta Federation of Labour spokesperson Trent Bancarz stated, “We don’t have details of exactly what happened.” Leduc Mayor Bob Young claimed the men were killed in a “gas accident” and offered his condolences to the victims’ families.

The occupational disaster took place at Millennium Cryogenic Technologies, a facility that uses liquid nitrogen as a strengthening agent for equipment manufactured for the oil industry. The company has not released a public statement on the incident.

Cody, the son of Daryn Bondarchuck, one of the men who died, said his father had worked at the plant for about two years. He related that his father was a careful person who took safety seriously.

Alberta Occupational Health and Safety (OHS), a provincial government agency, took over the inquiry into the Leduc accident from the RCMP. OHS only allowed the company to resume operations in late November but has been reluctant to provide any details on its investigation into what led to the accident.

Members of the Alberta cryogenics industry responded with apparent surprise to the fatal accident. President of Alberta Cryogenics Jeff Worth asserted, “while nitrogen is classified as a dangerous good, working with it is generally considered low risk ... It’s safe, as long as it’s handled properly.”

In reality, nitrogen is a well-known “silent killer” and

the risks of asphyxiation have been well-established. According to the OHS website, when there is not enough air or oxygen, asphyxiation and death can (and do) occur.

Between 1992 and 2002, there were 80 deaths related to nitrogen in the USA. The gas is so potent that three states—Alabama, Oklahoma, and Mississippi—have authorized its use as a backup method of capital punishment.

Industrial tragedies such as the accident in Leduc are sadly all too commonplace across the country and in all economic sectors. On November 21, a man died after being electrocuted at a greenhouse in Leamington, Ontario. The following day, a Canadian Pacific train conductor was hit and killed by a train in Calgary, Alberta, and four days later a 24-year-old man was killed in Magnetawan, Ontario when his commercial vehicle rolled on top of him while he was installing chains.

In 2016, the most recent year for which data is available, the Association of Workers Compensation Boards of Canada documented 905 workplace-related deaths across the country. This equates to around four deaths for every day of a five-day work week.

Ontario had the most fatalities with 289, followed by Alberta and British Columbia with 144 each. A marked increase in illness-related deaths in the provinces of Nova Scotia (21 percent), New Brunswick (17 percent), and British Columbia (9 percent) was also noted. In Saskatchewan, the Workers Compensation Board reported that the number of workplace fatalities almost doubled from the previous year.

Government indifference to the alarming statistics on worker fatalities is reflected in lax occupational health and safety regulations, designed to protect employers and permit the further expansion of their profits. As the

World Socialist Web Site noted last year, provincial penalties for occupational deaths range from just \$25,563 in British Columbia to a still meager \$275,000 in Alberta. These nominal fines do nothing to deter corporations, who simply view them as a surcharge on the cost of doing business. Criminal prosecutions for workplace deaths are virtually unheard of. The longest jail sentence handed down to an employer for a worker death since 2007 was 60 days.

The horrendous levels of workplace fatalities and injuries result directly from government policies permitting private businesses to operate with absolute impunity in their drive to boost the exploitation of their workers. That lives are compromised everyday by revenue-driven protocols of sped-up workflows, faulty equipment, temporary employment hiring practices, improper handling of dangerous chemicals, and inadequate employee training is of no consequence to corporations, which can fairly assume that the government will turn a blind eye to their malefactions.

Regulatory bodies, compelled to operate with ever declining budgets as a result of government austerity, are impotent. That they understand workplace accidents to be entirely preventable is of no avail. Under conditions where private profit is the main driver of economic production, accidents can only be treated as inevitable, while safety warnings count for little or nothing.

The unions, which long ago renounced the defence of even the immediate interests of workers, are fully complicit in the deterioration in workplace safety. When workers seek to resist wage cuts, pension and benefit concessions, and unsafe working conditions, the unions endeavour to smother and betray their struggles. At the same time, the unions connive with the employers to intensify the exploitation of working people in the name of ensuring corporate “competitiveness” and “saving jobs.”

The duplicitous character of the union bureaucracy can be seen in the recent strike at Canada Post, where workers are struggling against a dramatic deterioration in working conditions, including the expansion of two-tier and precarious employment and a huge spike in work-related injuries. Postal workers suffer injuries on the job at a rate more than five times greater than the norm in federally regulated sectors.

Although armed with a massive strike mandate, the

Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) kept workers on a tight leash. It organized a campaign of limited rotating strikes and kept silent about the threat of a government back-to-work law, even after Prime Minister Justin Trudeau had all but announced that his Liberals were preparing to criminalize all job action against Canada Post. Then, when the Liberals rammed an “emergency” strikebreaking law through parliament, CUPW President Mike Palecek ordered postal workers to return to their jobs under conditions where none of the safety issues have been addressed.

The capitalists’ insatiable greed for ever greater profits has led to increased corporate demands for faster, cheaper labour and extreme cost-cutting measures, turning industrial workplaces into death traps. Decades of corporatist collaboration between the unions, employers and the state have invariably resulted in the erosion of safety regulations and the adoption of “occupational safety legislation” that all but guarantees employers freedom from prosecution, and that the concerns and complaints of workers will be sidelined and stifled. Under these conditions, further workplace tragedies are inevitable.

In a social order in which employers routinely neglect the basic safety needs of workers—and governments and pro-capitalist unions act as their accomplices—the only path forward is for workers to build rank-and-file workplace committees to fight for their rights as an integral part of the development of a socialist working-class political movement. Such a movement would fight for workers’ control over production and the radical reorganization of socioeconomic life, so as to make human needs, not the profits of a tiny bloated minority, its animating principle.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>