

Canada: Trudeau gives cash handout to meatpacking giants as COVID-19 cases rise among workers

By Carl Bronski
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Justin Trudeau's big business Liberal government announced a \$77 million dollar subsidy for meat processing firms this week. Presented as necessary to fund personal protective equipment and improve workplace safety, the Liberals' cash handout to Cargill, JBS, and other highly-profitable companies underscores the government's support for their ruthless exploitation of their low-paid, precariously employed workforces amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The announcement came as the health and safety crisis within Canada's meatpacking industry escalated this week. A third plant in Alberta has now recorded an outbreak of COVID-19 infections. Thirty-six workers out of a 440 person workforce at a Harmony Beef facility, just north of Calgary in Balzac, Alberta have now tested positive for the coronavirus.

Meanwhile, at the Cargill plant in Chambly, Quebec, which employs 500 workers, at least 30 cases have been recorded. An additional 80 workers deemed to have been in close contact with the infected workers have been sent home, meaning more than one-fifth of the workforce is currently off work.

The outbreak at the Harmony Beef facility has given rise to renewed calls to close the plant. The slaughterhouse was closed for four days beginning March 27, after Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) inspectors withdrew their services after an initial infection was recorded among the meatpacking workers. Alberta government health and safety officials, who declined to enter the plant, then conducted a virtual video inspection, and gave the go-ahead for production to restart March 31.

A similar virtual check at the giant Cargill plant in High River, Alberta gave it a clean bill of health last month, only to see infections skyrocket in the following days. Workers at that plant were forced back to work Monday after a two week shutdown, despite 935 infections out of a 2,000 person labour force having been recorded, alongside one death and

seven hospitalizations. Yesterday, it emerged that the father of a Cargill meatpacker has died from COVID-19, marking the second death in connection with the outbreak.

The continuing rise of positive cases inside the Harmony plant has occurred despite daily temperature checks, the distribution of face masks, the installation of plexiglass work station dividers, and the implementation of social distancing measures "where possible."

This phenomenon is not unique to the Harmony workplace. In the United States, where several meatpacking plants were temporarily closed last month, spikes in infection rates have already been recorded after the plants re-opened. Many infections are passed by asymptomatic individuals, negating the effect of temperature-taking protocols as the roll-out of more extensive virus-testing equipment continues to lag dramatically across the continent. Additionally, the nature of the slaughter- and assembly-line work processes, involving close quarter interactions amongst hundreds of individuals, provides ample room for virus transmissions to continue.

The same day that the new infection figures were released at Harmony, Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced an "initial" \$252 million bailout package for beef and hog farmers and meat processing corporations. The coronavirus outbreaks in the meatpacking industry have caused a 40 percent reduction in beef and pork production over the past month. Although farmers, overstocked with livestock, have been forced to sell their animals for a loss, consumer prices for beef and pork products at the grocery store chains have increased by as much as 40 percent, even as millions of Canadian workers face mounting financial insecurity.

In addition to the \$77 million handout to the meatpacking firms, \$125 million will go to aid beef and pork producers, and a paltry \$50 million has been set aside to buy agricultural products for distribution to the country's food banks, which have seen a dramatic increase in demand due

to the pandemic's economic fallout.

These pathetic measures will not even come close to resolving the looming food crisis. As millions of workers and their families struggle to get by on the federal government's minuscule \$2,000 per month Canada Emergency Response Benefit, the ruling elite is continuing its strategy of providing rations to workers and hundreds of billions in bailouts to the corporations and investors.

Along with the Trudeau government and its multi-million dollar subsidy to ensure the ongoing ruthless exploitation of meatpackers, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union is playing a pivotal role in forcing workers to risk their lives on the job. The union has issued a series of statements condemning the life-threatening conditions in which workers are being compelled to work, but it is adamantly opposed to organizing any job action to oppose them.

The UFCW has left the meatpackers—largely vulnerable immigrant workers, many of whom are on precarious Temporary Foreign Worker permits—to face the virus alone. As reluctant and terrified workers at the Cargill plant in Alberta were being forced back to work on Monday, local union president Thomas Hesse assured the corporation and the Alberta government that production would restart. “We are looking at legal options,” said Hesse. “We are not asking for a work stoppage. A work stoppage would not be legal.”

In other words, the UFCW, like the entire union bureaucracy, values and prioritizes the “legal” monstrosity that is Canada's labour relations system—a system that has helped enforce one round of attacks after another on all sections of workers over the past 40 years—over the lives of its members and their families.

The UFCW's reliance on the labour and health and safety boards of Alberta, which are controlled by the pro-big business, hard-right United Conservative Party government of Jason Kenney, is a flagrant abdication of its responsibility to protect the well-being of the workers it purports to represent. The union bureaucrats' overriding concern is demonstrating to the employers and the state that they are responsible partners who will enforce capitalist laws and contracts.

Similarly, the Syndicat Agriculture Union, which organizes federal meat inspectors, has refused to organize any job action to shut down processing facilities that it publicly denounces as unsafe, and has urged the government to order closed until health concerns are addressed. Without on-site inspectors, meat processing facilities are not allowed to operate.

For his part, Prime Minister Trudeau, whose government oversees meat inspections, washed his hands of any responsibility, by declaring the health crisis in the plants to

be a strictly provincial matter.

Left to their own devices and without a political leadership, workers in the industry—who are deemed essential and not covered by provincial government lockdown orders—are increasingly recording their fear of virus infection and opposition to unsafe working conditions by absenting themselves from work. Last month, absenteeism rates by meatpackers at JBS in Brooks, Alberta reached levels that threatened the closure of the facility. Up to 1,000 absences were recorded in a single day. Management, in an attempt to keep one shift going, offered a temporary \$4 per hour shift premium for the low-paid workforce, but that had little impact on the terrified workers. As of this writing, 769 workers have been infected, plus another 500 in the town of 15,000. There have been four deaths.

Meatpackers must demand that the plants be shut down so that comprehensive safety measures can be taken to protect them from the virus. They must intervene with their own independent program and form their own rank-and-file committees separate from the rotten unions to protect their lives and livelihoods. This is a program that begins with social needs, not what the corporate bosses claim they can afford.

This program should include the rollout of mass testing, contact tracing and quarantining to contain the virus; the shutting down of all nonessential industries with full pay for all workers affected; the provision of masks, gloves and other personal protective equipment to medical staff and all other essential workers; and the investment of billions in the health care system to provide the best possible care to those infected by the virus.

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