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Cargill workers have accepted a new collective agreement with 71 per cent voting in favour of the new contract, United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) Local 401 announced on December 4. In its statement, Local 401 called the moment a "bittersweet victory for Cargill workers."

"Working with their union, UFCW Local 401, worker representatives from Cargill demanded fairness, respect, and compensation from their employer. Like all workers, they had one simple thing to say: We Matter," the statement from Local 401 says.

The union has announced some provisions of the agreement, including a \$1,000 COVID-19 bonus, a \$1,000 signing bonus, retroactive pay to December 2020, a \$5 an hour wage increase (21 per cent over the life of the contract) for many employees, improved health benefits for workers and their families, and "significant contract provisions to facilitate a new culture of health, safety, dignity, and

respect in the workplace." The six-year contract is retroactive to December 31, 2020.

"The injustices at Cargill, however, are not made right by the contract. Local 401 and its activists look to the future to enforce the new rights of Cargill workers in this unprecedented collective agreement," the statement from Local 401 says.

For the workers it is a bittersweet moment because nothing will erase the pain, suffering and death they experienced as close to half of the plant became infected with COVID-19 and two workers and a family member died in the first wave alone. Nothing will wash away the anger that Cargill has yet to acknowledge or be held to account for its negligence and outright indifference to the well-being and very lives of the workers.



Local 401 says the contract was "the best of its kind and represented unprecedented gains in this time of economic and political uncertainty and during the biggest health crisis the world has ever seen. A victory has been won and this is a day to celebrate."

The collective efforts and strength of the workers were decisive, Local 401 emphasizes. The workers know there is no cure from the gods of plague -- this giant oligopoly and the government in power. Local 401 was fully prepared for a strike, with tents, floodlights, propane heaters, facilities for parking and much more prepared, and emphasizes that even though a strike was averted, the fight is far from over.



Tents set up by UFCW 401 as part of preparation for possible strike at Cargill.

"In the coming months, we also look forward to the citizens of Alberta joining with us in calling for reforms and restructuring in the meatpacking industry. Cargill has boasted of their highest profits ever while beef prices have skyrocketed. Meanwhile, Cargill's labour costs have been unchanged up until now. So, many are upset.

"Workers have been ripped off. Ranchers have been ripped off. And we've all been ripped off at the supermarket counter. Government failed to protect these workers, as well as failing to protect Alberta ranchers and consumers. Change must occur," Local 401 concluded.



Cargill Workers Remain Vigilant

- Peggy Morton -



UFCW hands out masks and information to workers entering Cargill after plant reopened following COVID outbreak, May 5, 2020.

Neo-liberal globalization has imposed inhuman working conditions in the meat processing industry. These include breakneck line speeds, a big contributor to the high rate of workplace injuries and illnesses, low pay, and a culture of threats, intimidation and bullying, including the pressure to work sick even under COVID-19.

Health and safety has been and remains a major concern for the workers at Cargill in High River, Alberta. In a recent study, in which several hundred Cargill workers took part, 34 per cent reported that they had been injured at work and 42 per cent that they had tested positive for COVID-19. The deaths of two workers, Benito Quesada and Hiep Bui Nguyen, and family member Armando Sallegue from COVID-19 remain on the workers' minds. The trauma of these deaths and the infection of 949 workers in the first wave of COVID-19 alone is still raw, and they are determined not to allow Cargill to carry on "business as usual."

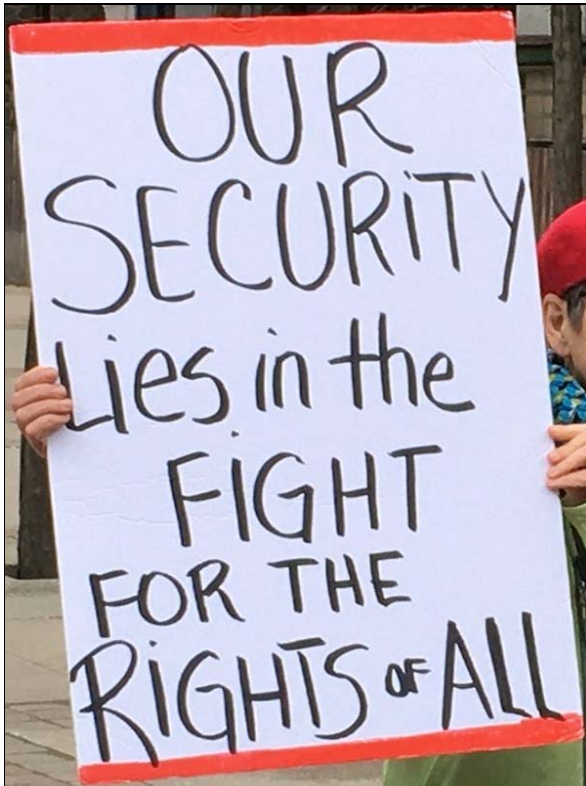


The Cargill workers and their union, Local 401 United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) showed throughout the pandemic that it is the workers who know what is needed and whose demands must be implemented to ensure the safety and health of the workers, their families and communities.

A representative of Local 401 recently spoke to *Workers' Forum* about the fight the workers have waged to defend their right to a healthy and safe workplace, a fight which is ongoing, including the collective work to ensure that Cargill lives up to the new collective agreement the workers recently ratified.

Despite the tragic loss of three lives and trauma to the workers at Cargill, when Cargill came to the negotiating table with the bargaining committee, not once in their opening statement did they mention the pandemic. Cargill still does not acknowledge its failure to keep the workplace safe or how gravely they mismanaged the outbreak, or take any responsibility for the illnesses and tragic

deaths. The overwhelming conclusion of the workers is that Cargill does not make any effort to keep the workers safe. The workers know that their active participation is decisive in the fight for their right to a safe and healthy workplace.



Workers are insisting that Cargill take COVID-19 protocols seriously in the face of the company's attitude that now that people are vaccinated health and safety protocols can be relaxed. This is not a reason to relax protocols, the workers say. A meat processing plant is tailor-made for COVID-19 to spread. Keeping the workplace sanitary requires constant and enhanced cleaning. Workers work very close together and there are many factors related to the working conditions which can lead to an outbreak. Improved sick time is an important issue so that no worker is put in the position of having to choose between coming to work sick or not being able to pay rent and buy food for their families.

There are various structures and protocols already in place with respect to health and safety at the plant, including the Joint Health and Safety Committee, but workers say that when they raise issues there they are not taken seriously. Meetings take place but then there is no action.

Another important issue is scheduling, to ensure that work is being done safely, and workers get the breaks they need. Working short-staffed is a big problem. The Cargill plant is usually short several hundred workers, and health and safety suffer when people are tired and overworked. When there are only seven people where there should be ten, this is not safe, the workers point out, and in addition it takes time to carry out the safety protocols.

Cargill speaks of "ongoing recruitment efforts locally" and "a lack of skilled workers to fill key positions in recent months." In fact the "for hire" sign never goes down, and it now contains an offer of sign-on bonuses. Cargill and other meat packers complain that "Canadians do not want to do this work." For many years they have used the temporary foreign workers program to recruit a vulnerable workforce whose work permits tie them to the plant, as well as refugee settlement programs. According to Cargill's website, since 2007, they worked closely with the Alberta Government to recruit over 1,000 foreign workers from both the Philippines and Mexico.

Cargill and other meat processors have asked the federal government to increase the cap on temporary foreign workers to 30 per cent of the workforce.

Early in negotiations for the new contract, Cargill wanted the union to make it easier for them to hire temporary foreign workers and provide fewer supports, a demand the union rejected. What Cargill needs to do, the union said, is to treat workers with respect, improve wages, sick time, benefits, and working conditions, including slowing the frantic speed of production which leads to injuries.

The workers say that Cargill has to recognize that it cannot be "business as usual." Their experience with the pandemic has proved that time and space are needed to be able to work in a safe fashion. When the line is moving at a pace that the workers cannot keep up with, this is unsafe. The workers want the line speed posted so they have proof when the line speed has been increased.

When the company said it was safe to go to work during the pandemic, the Local 401 representative said, it failed the workers; it was not truthful with them. He said that the workers report that their experience, particularly the fight for safe working conditions, has emboldened and empowered them to speak up because when they stand together they can make a difference.

The experience of the Cargill workers has proven to them that it was the actions of the workers and the union, not the company or the government of Alberta, that forced the shutdown and other measures to protect them at the height of the pandemic and that workers' health and safety cannot be left in the hands of the company and the government. In its statement on the ratification of a new collective agreement, the Union said:

"The injustices at Cargill, however, are not made right by the contract. Local 401 and its activists look to the future to enforce the new rights of Cargill workers in this unprecedented collective agreement."

Local 401 United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) represents the 2,000 workers at the Cargill plant in High River, Alberta. It reported that the new collective agreement contains "significant contract provisions to facilitate a new culture of health, safety, dignity, and respect in the workplace."



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