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**Safety Concerns in Meatpacking Sector and Railways**  
**Determined Fight of Alberta Workers and Families for Safety of All Workers**

- Peggy Askin -



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Alberta workers and families are stepping up their fight for compensation for all injured workers and for proactive measures to protect all workers from further disease and injuries and to hold employers and government accountable.

One industry where the workers and their organizations are very active in demanding immediate protection is the meatpacking industry. The workers in meatpacking plants have faced massive and repeated outbreaks of COVID-19 in Canada, Quebec and the U.S. during the last year. Their efforts have forced the Alberta government to establish vaccination clinics at the Cargill plant in High River and the JBS plant in Brooks where workers began receiving vaccinations on April 29. The Health Minister announced last week that vaccinations would be provided for all meatpacking employees across the province, more than 15,000 workers.

The Cargill plant in High River Alberta had close to 1,000 workers contract COVID-19 in the spring of 2020, the largest packing plant outbreak in North America. Two workers and a family member of one of the workers died. Almost one year later, in February and March 2021 there was another outbreak at Cargill and, at the same time, there was a massive outbreak affecting over 500 workers at the Olymel pork processing plant in Red Deer, Alberta. Four workers died. In 2020 there was also a huge outbreak at the JBS plant in Brooks and one worker died. In 2005 the combined efforts of the workers at the JBS plant, including many who had emigrated from Sudan and workers who had moved to Alberta from Newfoundland, succeeded in organizing their plant and improving their working conditions.

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The workers and their organizations worked tirelessly, demanding measures be taken to protect them on the job and for the temporary closure of both Cargill in 2020 and Olymel earlier this year to stop further spread of the disease. Through their actions they saved lives. Before and after the shutdowns, their demands to both of the huge global companies that own the plants and to government and public health officials included proactive measures, such as increasing the distance between work stations and decreasing production line speeds so fewer workers would be on the work floor. All the while the Alberta government, like other provincial governments, refused to take responsibility for ensuring that employers took safety measures to protect workers and save lives.

Far from taking responsibility to ensure the health and safety of workers, these governments are passing laws that put workers' lives in even greater danger.

Governments are active participants in making sure that these huge corporations do not have to take responsibility for the safety of the workers they employ. During the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak at the Cargill plant in High River many workers courageously exercised their right to refuse unsafe work. Bill 47, the *Ensuring Safety and Cutting Red Tape Act, 2020* which amends the province's Occupational Health and Safety legislation, comes into effect in September 2021. Part of this thoroughly anti-worker legislation is provisions restricting a worker's ability to refuse unsafe work.

It is not just workers and their unions who are speaking out about their concerns regarding dangerous working conditions. Families are speaking for justice for their lost family members and to prevent further loss of life. The families of meatpacking workers and rail workers killed on the job have succeeded in having criminal investigations opened into the deaths of their family members. The families of CN and CP workers have initiated petition campaigns calling for protection for workers who speak out about the dangers in their workplaces and to bring an end to railway companies and their private police forces being in charge of investigating fatalities and accidents which have brought tragedy to workers and communities. Rail workers report that their health and safety conditions are deteriorating, that old, unsafe rail cars are being brought out for use. They also report that, in spite of federal Transportation and Safety Board orders issued regarding what must be done to stop runaway trains after three railway workers died in a fatal derailment near Field, BC in 2019, these violations continue.



**September 13, 2013. Calgary demonstration against CP Rail over derailments.**

Our security lies in our fight for the rights of all and our experience confirms that the fight for lives is the fight for rights.

(Photos: UFCW, Teamsters, G.C. Carra)

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