

Meat Plant Workers in COVID Canada

by Minsook Lee

(Approximate 13-15 minute read)

This text is presented in connection to WAHC's main gallery exhibition [Theatre from the Jungle](#).

The pandemic has turned meat plants into killing floors, not just for the animals routinely slaughtered but terrifyingly, for the workers.

In 2020, two workers died at the Cargill meat processing plant in High River, Alberta which reported [1,560 cases of COVID](#) – the largest single cluster in North America. The second largest outbreak was at another meat-packing plant – JBS Canada's beef facility in Brooks, Alberta where over 500 workers tested positive and one person died. 43% of Alberta's cases can be traced to these two sites and they alone [make up 70%](#) of Canada's beef processing capabilities.

Why have slaughterhouses emerged as COVID hotspots in Canada? COVID19 has proven deadly to meat plant workers because as a category, the lives of the people who do this work are devalued and expendable in the brutal calculus of racial capitalism. The workers are low income, mostly racialized and a large percentage of the workforce are migrant workers without status, many of whom do not speak English and are categorized as 'low skilled'. Canada's corporate and governmental response to health and safety protections for these workers has been deplorable and arguably criminal. Working conditions in the meat processing industry are notoriously difficult and ripe for pathogens.

Workplace illness and deaths in meat plants has almost been written off as collateral damage in the national effort to maintain the pace and ensure our food chain churns inexorably and unabated. Which does raise a question –wouldn't a pandemic suggest we curtail our appetites? Our desire to consume remains at near insatiable levels, pandemic be damned.

Eating animals is a bloody act and it requires killing. I remind you of the obvious because today's industrialized meat production process renders the flesh most consumers buy in local supermarkets to appear as pre-cut geometric modules, neatly cellophaned on bloodless trays. Advertising, packaging and the fluorescent, muzak-scored runways of grocery aisles work to jet us as far away from the fur, hooves, howls and guts of beasts who've died for our dinner.

What completes this extreme dissociation with our food sources is our alienation from the people who work in meat plants. The workers are made just as invisible and disposable as the animals in the factory food death-chain.

In Canada, the vast majority of people who work in slaughterhouses are the unseen: racialized immigrants. Many are migrant workers permitted entry on temporary work permits that indenture workers to their employer. Contradictions abound: migrant workers are classified as 'temporary' but used to address chronic labour shortages, their labour is essential but their lives disposable. Canada's migrant labour program ties workers to a single employer who can exercise virtually unchecked power over key aspects of their lives from housing, transportation, access to healthcare and, in many cases, social interactions in Canada. The relationship with their employer has been described as paternalistic and feudal¹. Migrant workers are expected to work long hours, sometimes under difficult conditions where exposure to pesticides and other chemicals is common. If workers balk or protest work site conditions, they are threatened with deportation. Repatriation is routinely used by employers to control, and contain worker agency. A feature of their lives is their [deportability](#)².

Settler colonial nations like Canada have historically managed racially codified settlement through immigration policies and migrant worker programs. Migrant worker programs not only fulfill an economic function but can be seen as 'nation-building projects.' They define what it means to belong by concretizing the identity of those who don't belong, thereby circumscribing the migrant as 'permanently foreign' in the imaginary of Canadian identity³. The migrant worker, frozen in their 'foreign-ness,' is a social construction that clarifies the domestic qualities of the Canadian worker and legitimizes differentiated sets of rights and privileges along citizen/non-citizen lines⁴. It is because migrant workers are predominantly racialized or Indigenous from the global south that these programs are described as creating a 'labour apartheid' within Canada.

Until recently, most Canadians didn't know how reliant we are on the labour of migrant workers. At the onset of the first lockdown in mid-March 2020, agribusiness operators were deemed essential and meat plants went into overdrive to maintain regular hours to protect Canada's food supply chain. Within days of imposing travel restrictions that barred entry to all travellers who are not Canadians or permanent residents, to contain

¹ Basok, Tanya. (2002). Tortillas and Tomatoes: Transmigrant Mexican Harvesters in Canada. 10.2307/20058684.

Preibisch, K. (2007). Local produce, foreign labour: Labour mobility programs and global trade competitiveness in Canada. *Rural Sociology*, 72(3), 418-489.

² Encalada Grez, E. (2011) "Policy Brief: Vulnerabilities of Female Migrant Farm Workers from Latin America and the Caribbean in Canada." FOCAL: The Canadian Foundation for the Americas, Policy Brief, pp. 1-6.

³ Sharma, Nandita. (2001). On Being Not Canadian: The Social Organization of "Migrant Workers" in Canada*. *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie*. 38. 415 - 439. 10.1111/j.1755-618X.2001.tb00980.x.

⁴ Sharma, Nandita. (2001). On Being Not Canadian: The Social Organization of "Migrant Workers" in Canada*. *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie*. 38. 415 - 439. 10.1111/j.1755-618X.2001.tb00980.x.

the spread of COVID19, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [announced exemptions for migrant workers](#). COVID laid bare one of Canada's dirty secrets: the country can't function without the labour of a group of exploited migrant workers. Workers who are afforded the least set of rights, few pathways to citizenship and are thereby condemned to permanent precarity.

Poverty cuts across both categories of workers who make up the bulk of the workforce at the meat plants – migrant workers and those with permanent residency. Both groups are often drawn from the same global pool of people and they have much in common. They are racialized or Indigenous (within their country of origin); English is not their primary language; and they are assessed as low-skilled or their professional qualifications are unrecognized in Canada.

Meat plants are heavily securitized and often located away from public view and scrutiny. They operate on volume and speed to maximize profit. Working in meat plants is known as 3D work: dirty, difficult and dangerous labour yet the pay is 20% less than other jobs in the industrial sector.

The Cargill Alberta plant processes 4,5000 heads of cattle a day. Workers on the fast-moving assembly lines have to de-skin, de-bone, slice and apportion carcasses at an almost inhuman rate. Workers' actions have been timed and segmented into an unforgiving Taylorist regiment of mechanized labour to eliminate inessential movement and reduce human movement to an exact science. [A 2016 OXFAM report](#) on poultry workers described how the pressure of production lines move so quickly that some workers wear nappies because they are refused adequate washroom breaks. During 'regular' operating times workplace safety is a concern.

Meat plants have some of the highest rates of occupational injuries such as blackened fingers and damaged joints to repetitive motion injuries and musculoskeletal disorders like carpal tunnel syndrome. There has been little study of the mental health consequences of working in a kill site. In this [CBC investigative report](#), one worker shared: *"It's hard to do this every day. Especially when the cow, when they knock it, it makes a voice. Like it's screaming or something like that,"* concluding that *"If people are emotional, it's hard for them to keep that job."*

In early April 2020, when the Cargill plant had only 38 COVID cases, the workers' union, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union Local 401, called for a temporary closure to enforce safety protocols and install protective devices. They were ignored. Management assured workers that the plant was safe as did an inspector from the provincial Occupational Health and Safety Department who inspected the work site via [cell phone video](#). But workers were concerned. Everything they heard about how the virus travelled signalled alarms about their working conditions. From an investigative report by the Globe and Mail: *"There's hundreds – thousands – of people moving through very limited spaces,"* said Thomas Hesse, UFCW Local 401 President. *"Narrow hallways. Small washroom areas. Small locker areas. Our antennae went up as soon as*

we started to hear about COVID. We thought to ourselves, ‘My goodness, how is this going to translate into packing houses?’ ”⁵

At the time, unease at the plants was palpable. Information was scarce, and made available only in English, rather than the languages workers do speak like Oromo, Tagalog, Spanish, Vietnamese and Chinese. The lack of clear information sowed confusion about how to access paid time off, compensation and isolation protocols. On the floor at Cargill workers reported that management had face shields but workers were not provided with proper PPE and were not able to practice social-distancing protocols. Cafeterias, locker rooms, kill floors and assembly lines remained crowded with workers packed against each other, elbow to elbow. Workers with symptoms say they were told they could continue working, even if they had positive COVID19 tests, hadn't completed their quarantine period or travelled abroad recently. Workers say they were threatened with layoff if they weren't willing and able to work. At the height of the lockdown, the company incentivized workers to report for shifts by offering a \$500 bonus for maintaining workplace attendance over eight consecutive weeks. Conditions didn't change until what seemed inevitable happened – a worker died after contracting COVID19 at the plant.

Bui Thi Hiep worked at the Cargill meat plant in High River Alberta for 23 years. Her job was to pick beef bone from hamburger meat. Local news reports described the 67 year-old woman as a friendly, caring person whose co-workers dubbed ‘Candy Momma’ because she would smilingly give out candy to all who walked by her refrigerated station. Bui's husband, [Nga Nguyen was in utter shock](#). He told journalists: *“I'm still numb and very lost. I don't know what to do,” he said. “I just want to end my life. I want to find a way to join my wife.”* Nguyen also disclosed that the company had not called him to offer condolences.

Two days prior to Bui's death Alberta government officials had held a tele-health conference with workers to assure them that the plant was safe, precautions were being taken and their lives were protected. Cargill closed the plant on April 20th after Bui's death. Speaking to the Toronto Star, [Bashir Mohamed, an Edmonton based writer and activist said](#) he believed conditions would have been addressed sooner if the workers weren't racialized immigrants or temporary foreign workers. Said Mohamed: *“If anywhere else in this province accounted for 26 per cent of the total (COVID19) cases, there would be outrage, people would be fired, people would have to resign.”*

Meat plants generate billions in profits for their owners. Cargill Ltd. is a Canadian subsidiary of the largest private company in the U.S., Cargill, which [filed revenue of \\$113.5 billion US in 2019](#). **JBS** Canada is a subsidiary of **JBS** S.A., a Brazilian company that is the world's largest processor of beef and pork, with more than [US\\$204 billion in revenue for 2019](#). As a business model, these corporate behemoths reap billions in profit on the backs of low-wage, migrant and racialized workers. COVID has

⁵ Baum Blaze, K. Grant, T. Tait, C. (2020) How Cargill Became The Site of Canada's Largest Single Outbreak of COVID-19. The Globe and Mail.

ratcheted up the grim violence of standard operating procedures within industrial slaughterhouses.

The second Cargill worker in Alberta to die from COVID19 was Benito Quesada, a 51-year-old shop steward with UFCW Local 401 who worked at the plant since 2007. His daughter Ariana Quesada is now fighting to have Cargill held criminally responsible for her father's death. Ariana Quesada and her father's union have filed a complaint with the RCMP who have begun a criminal investigation into charges that the company did not do enough to protect Benito Quesada from coronavirus. This is the first of its kind related to a COVID19 linked death.

Upon announcing her complaint Ariana [spoke movingly to CBC](#): *"I spent Christmas with one less person to hug. And all the executives and general managers, everyone at Cargill got to spend Christmas with their loved ones. And I did not get that."* Quesada alleges her father died due to criminal negligence because Cargill failed to set up adequate safeguards to prevent the virus from spreading at the worksite. In the midst of the outbreak Cargill offered workers like Benito \$500 to continue working, an incentive that put his life at risk. If charged, Cargill would be found guilty under the [Westray Law](#), a Criminal Code provision named after the 1992 mining disaster in Nova Scotia that killed 26 miners. The law puts the onus on the employer to take 'reasonable steps to prevent bodily harm' to workers. So far, the law hasn't secured many convictions, only six employers have been found guilty under the law since its passage in 2004. This is Canada's first police investigation into a COVID19 related death at the workplace. To date, no charges have been laid.

Aside from seniors, COVID has killed a disproportionate number of working-class, Black and racialized workers who do the essential work that makes this country run. The full picture is missing and there is a [growing call for race based COVID data](#) to be collected. But as [Rinaldo Walcott has written](#), the data needs to be followed by policy that actually saves lives. What is clear is that workers in low-wage, survival jobs, most of whom are Black, Brown and racialized, have not been adequately protected. Celebrated at the onset of the pandemic as heroes, their lives have been sacrificed as collateral damage for the sake of 'the economy'.

Not only did the empty praises ring hollow, they turned vengeful on a dime. Cargill executives and Alberta public health officials blamed the outbreak on workers' lifestyles – that workers carpooled and lived in large multi-family households were raised as issues of concern. Workers were even blamed for living with family members who worked in long term care homes, another sector rife with outbreaks. Nobody talked about addressing structural conditions that exposed workers to the virus – the lack of paid-sick days, low wages, unaffordable housing or lack of public transit. Instead, workers were scapegoated for being poor and living the lives poor people live.

Over a hundred years ago, novelist and socialist Upton Sinclair wrote 'The Jungle', about the nightmarish living and working conditions for the immigrant workers in the meatpacking plants in the Chicago stockyards. Sinclair condemned a society where "the

majority of human beings are not yet human beings at all, but simply machines for the creating of wealth for others.” Presciently, Sinclair warned that the crowded living quarters workers were forced to put up with were “*centres of contagion, poisoning the lives of all of us, and making happiness impossible for even the most selfish.*” Sinclair’s exposé of working conditions outraged civil society, and led to changes. Not the kind of radical socialist revolution for workers’ rights that Sinclair had hoped for, but changes to sanitation regulations and the establishment of the Federal Meat Inspection Act (FMIA).

Meat plant workers form the super exploited class within Canada’s workforce. It’s hard to imagine someone living through 2020 without recognizing we need change. Sinclair thought his exposé would incite radical change. But as before, will the health of the industry’s profits override that of the workers? Unless movements coalesce to support workers’ voices and migrant workers’ justice campaigns, we’ll see an industry attempt to clean up its dirty track record through advanced mechanization and other technological adjustments that address biohazards and viral outbreaks, but do nothing to change the predatorial treatment of workers.

Unless we challenge governments to introduce policies that protect public health over the economy, low-waged, racialized workers will continue to die on the kill floors of this country.

The Alberta Labour Federation is calling for a criminal investigation into the Cargill outbreak. The provincial NDP wants a public inquiry into the spread of the virus at Cargill and other meat-packing plants, including JBS.

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