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voice at work**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 21, 2020

Never Again! Alberta's food processing workers don't have to die for Canadians to have food: union leader

Calgary, AB – UFCW Local 401 President Thomas Hesse has released the following statement in reaction to news that a member of the union employed by Cargill in High River has died after contracting COVID-19:

"I offer our member's family my deepest condolences and hope to speak with them after they have had time to grieve their loss. Another of our members from Cargill is in intensive care. I share the grief, the anger, and the fear that every one of our members feel today. We are united in our grief.

Cargill and the Government of Alberta ignored UFCW Local 401's request to shut the plant to keep employees safe and told employees it was safe to go to work. Now a member of our union has died in the epicentre of the largest outbreak in our province. I hold the company and the Government responsible.

There is nothing that Cargill or the government can do to make this right. We are looking at every possible legal remedy, including the possibility of criminal charges. But the fact is that nothing can adequately compensate the family and friends that are left behind. We can only hope there are not more individuals who suffer and die from this horrible disease.

Government officials and employers told our members they are "essential" and must come to work. But they have not adequately protected workers, and now our members are getting sick and dying. If our members' work is essential, they shouldn't be treated like they are expendable.

The shutdown of Cargill announced yesterday was obviously too little too late. Today, as a first step, we are encouraging all UFCW Local 401 members to learn about their right to refuse dangerous work during COVID-19. It is an important legal right in this country, and each individual worker needs to know about their right. Our union is committed to educating our members on this issue so they can stand up for themselves as they so choose.

We have lost faith that the provincial government can keep working Albertans safe. We call on the federal government to show leadership and stretch their jurisdiction to ensure all those who work in Canada are safe.

The problems we have raised are not seen only at Cargill. JBS in Brooks is just as bad, and we fear it may be worse. We have also asked for preventative measures at Olymel in Red Deer.

There is something that can be done to stop this tragedy from happening again: listen to workers. We are calling for an independent, worker-centred review of health and safety in food processing facilities and grocery stores, to create a clear, effective, and well-enforced regulatory regime for Alberta's food sector.

Hundreds of workers should be interviewed anonymously so policymakers know what is really happening without the bias of political agendas or businesses motivated by profit. There is no reason why the federal government cannot lead this charge.

The tragedies unfolding at Cargill in High River and JBS in Brooks could have been prevented if the lives of workers had been put over concern for business interests and the product.

Alberta's food processing workers don't have to die for Canadians to have food. Join with me in saying "Never Again!"

Alberta Health Services came to inspect Cargill on April 7, when the first COVID-19 cases were confirmed. UFCW Local 401 doesn't know when exactly they came because the union wasn't included in that process. When UFCW asked for a written report from the AHS inspection, the union was told there was none, and that AHS Calgary Zone, relied on "verbal reports" from its staff that the plant was safe.

On April 12, union president Thomas Hesse wrote to the Alberta Minister of Labour complaining of conditions at Cargill and called for the plant to be temporarily shut down. UFCW Local 401 also filed a formal complaint with Occupational Health and Safety. The report of that investigation indicated the inspection was performed "virtually." It is disturbing that OHS called the plant safe without attending the plant themselves. Still, authorities and government Ministers assured employees that their workplace is safe.

On April 20, Cargill announced the plant would be closing after the Chief Medical Officer of Health confirmed an employee from the plant had died of COVID-19. Cargill has not confirmed whether employees will be paid during the shutdown.

The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 401 is the largest private sector union in Western Canada and represents 32,000 Alberta workers mainly in the food processing and retail sectors.

Further information

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