



your voice at work

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United Food and Commercial Workers Canada Union, Local No. 401

August 27, 2020

Via Email

Sofina Foods/Lilydale

2126 Hurst Road SE
Calgary, AB T2G 4M5

Attention: Gerry Beadle, Plant Manager, Lilydale Calgary

Dear Gerry:

RE: CALL FOR TEMPORARY PLANT CLOSURE

The recent outbreak among employees at Sofina/Lilydale Calgary has now reached 18 cases. While we are hopeful that today's round of testing will show no further spread, no one can say for certain whether this outbreak has been contained and whether this workplace is safe. Hope is unreliable and brings little comfort in these circumstances.

In your letter of August 26, 2020, you acknowledge that we have had to work towards an accurate understanding of the risk. The reality is that we do not have an accurate understanding of the risk employees are asked to undertake at the plant when they show up for their shifts today. For our part, we are not satisfied that the plant is safe.

We are asking you to take urgent action as follows:

- 1) An immediate temporary closure of the Lilydale Calgary plant until it can be demonstrated that the outbreak has been contained and that the plant is safe (i.e. test results show no further spread, proper and thorough sanitization of the facility has occurred, etc.). In our view, this could take two weeks.
- 2) Guaranteed full compensation for every single employee during this temporary shutdown so as to protect workers' lives and livelihoods and ensure the effectiveness of the closure.
- 3) An immediate meeting with union officials, experts, and government officials of appropriate competency and jurisdiction to design clear and enforceable rules around health and safety in the workplace.

Why we are asking for closure

On August 25, 2020, we wrote to Sofina with a series of urgent questions that will help us with our understanding of the specific circumstances at the plant, and we await that comprehensive response.

In the meantime, anxiety among our members is building. Having consulted with our members and participated in meetings with company and government authorities over the

past days, it is our considered view that mitigation measures taken prior to this outbreak were inadequate. Were they adequate, we would not have an outbreak.

Even after the first round of AHS testing, workers were still exposed to the virus. The results of a recent round of tests may not be known for days. Still, the plant operates, and each day that it does is an unknown risk to our members.

We are concerned by a number of issues, which we have made known in our interactions with Sofina and government officials. The results of tests have slowly made their way to employees and the plant; proper medical masks were not provided until last week; and face shields have been provided on an inconsistent basis, mainly because they have not been required. We acknowledge recent improvements in those areas, but the case numbers continue to grow, and the results of those efforts are not known.

This week, we have seen what we consider to be red flags in the handling of this outbreak and mitigation efforts. Perhaps most troubling was the fact that an employee who had tested positive attended and was allowed to work an entire shift before being notified of their positive test result. In our view, this could have been prevented had there been – at least for a time – no workplace for that employee to go to.

In calling for a temporary closure, it is our goal to ensure that those with the ability and responsibility to provide and maintain a healthy and safe workplace are held to that obligation. Government officials and Sofina can close the plant.

We acknowledge the fact that, in spite of the massive outbreaks and loss of life food workers and their family members have suffered on account of the spread of COVID-19 in processing plants, health authorities and government officials in Alberta have not yet provided directives to industry mandating that they implement specific measures to keep workers safe.

Government officials have so far refused to independently study the problem, much less regulate and impose meaningful oversight. Our calls for oversight and regulation have been answered with new regulations over our activities as a union, not those of industry. The fact remains that, had adequate directives been in place and followed, we likely would not be calling for the closure of your plant today.

Employees don't feel safe

In April, Alberta Health Services [ordered](#) a Jollibee restaurant closed for not following social distancing directives. There were no cases linked to that location. Yet no food processing facility in Alberta has been ordered closed for any length of time. In our view, employers should not wait for an AHS directive to act responsibly and protect their employees' safety and health. It is just not realistic.

While AHS may not call for you to close temporarily, many of your employees are asking that you do so. They are asking for your leadership.

In a survey of our members launched last night, preliminary results show 80% of your workforce are afraid to go to work. They do not feel confident that the mitigation efforts implemented so far have been effective, and they are worried for themselves and their families.

But don't take our word for it. Here are some comments from your employees that have been shared with us, which we present here without attribution and so written:

“We do not feel safe working with an outbreak”

“The plant should close for a deep cleaning”

"Shut down the company for 2 weeks. So that it will stop spreading the virus. And also give time the company to think the best necessary precautions. We're talking about our health so please shut down the company for 2 weeks."

"Our employer must sort out the close contracted members with those already positive with covid"

"Because if the covid19 measures [were] well implemented there shouldn't [have been] an outbreak that had happened. The virus has an incubation period which is not seriously considered by sofina. Employees still come to work even having a virus in the body but no symptoms that manifest yet. And that causes rapid transmission of the virus."

"Let the [employees] know as soon as they discover the employees who tested positive and potential risk area to post it in what shift and departments so we can have extra caution as we doing our daily task as We expect to do as we employees."

"I was surrounded by covid positive employee in the lunch room but since they did not mention my name to be a possible contact am I not supposed to be in quarantine?"

"Social distancing is not being followed."

"We are not save in our work place please push the company to shutdown at least for the three weeks thanks"

"I think that we should close the workplace for 14 days for proper cleaning to happen. Then we can get back to work after the cleaning and 14 days."

"I'm having hard time to sleep even food you feel like life is meaningless the company care more about money but it doesn't care about the safety of the workers and their families it seems like if you get sick or die it doesn't matter to them the business will go on as usually. Even we suppose to get social workers to help us mentally emotionally physically and spiritually. Some of us are struggling with our own personal issues and add CORONA to how can our bodies handle it."

These are comments we have received from our members within the past 24 hours.

We reiterate our lack of confidence in the safety of the plant. As we wrote to you days ago, we will not tolerate another Cargill. We urge your company and the government authorities responsible for our members' safety to follow the legal and appropriate mechanisms available.

Finally, we remind you that we are in collective bargaining. The health, safety, and lives of our members are the kinds of critical issues that – if not adequately addressed – can be cause for much more disruptive action available to workers under the Alberta *Labour Relations Code* and elsewhere.

We respectfully urge you to listen to our members' fears and close the plant until we know – and they feel – it is safe.

Regards,



Thomas Hesse
President, UFCW Local 401

Cc: UFCW Local 401 Leadership
Jeff Ible, Union Labour Relations Officer
Paul Meinema, National President, UFCW Canada
Les Cowley, Vice President, Poultry Operations, Sofina Foods
Dr. Jia Hu MD MSc CCFP FRCPC, Medical Officer of Health – Alberta Health Services
Honorable Jason Copping, Minister of Labour and Immigration, Government of Alberta