COVID-19 AND MEATPACKERS IN SOUTHERN ALBERTA

AVOIDING 'THE CULTURALIST TRAP'

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The province of Alberta is home to two of the largest meatpacking plants in the country: Cargill in High River employs 2,000 workers; JBS Foods in Brooks employs 2,600 (Herring, 2020). Together these two plants account for 70 percent of Canada's beef supply (Rieger, 2020).

Meatpacking employees have the highest probability of a disabling injury of all manufacturing employees, at a rate that is more than double the manufacturing average in Alberta (Charlesbois & Summan, 2014). Modern plants rely on a Taylorist mode of production involving line workers standing shoulder-to-shoulder making the same cuts of meat over and over again. This results in a high rate of repetitive motion injuries (Stull & Broadway, 1995).

The first cases of COVID-19 were reported at Cargill in early April 2019. While workers pushed for the plant to close, media reports indicate that workers were incentivized to continue to come to work despite fears over the virus. As well, they were given confusing and misleading health information by their employer (Blaze Baum, Tait, & Grant, 2020). At the height of the outbreak, 1,500 cases could be traced back to Cargill, with two workers dying, along with the father of another worker (Klazsus, 2020). In Brooks, 900 cases of COVID-19 were reported among workers, and one worker died (Rieger, 2020).

As the scope and scale of the outbreak became evident, the provincial government, through the Chief Public Health Officer, Dr. Deena Hinshaw, sought to offer context for how the virus had spread so quickly in the community:

> "Many of the Filipino workers... live in large households where it's difficult for a sick person to isolate themselves. In some cases, their partners worked at health-care facilities and seniors residences with outbreaks of their own. Some of the workers also carpooled to work at Cargill. There's also a strong ethic in the Filipino community to not let the sniffles get in the way of a hard day's work, Hinshaw said." (Staples, 2020)

While certainly the living conditions of workers played a role in the spread of the virus – as many have noted, the ability to practice physical distancing is a privilege not available to all – these comments contributed to a narrative that quickly began circulating that effectively blamed workers for both contracting and spreading the virus. This narrative centered on the *cultural* practices of workers who were identified as living in overcrowded housing, carpooling, and being hardworking immigrants with a strong work ethic..

Little effort has been made, however, to differentiate between purported *cultural* practices of immigrant workers and the structural conditions of poverty, housing discrimination, and transnational financial obligation that might lead to the conditions cited. In turn, racialized workers in both Brooks and High River have faced heightened forms of racial discrimination from town residents (Dryden, 2020; Mosleh, 2020).

This is what Janes (2005) has referred to as a *culturalist tra*p where culture is uncritically used to explain social, economic and health inequalities. Stephanie Premji argues that

"commonly held discourses on culture in occupational health research are largely simplistic, individualist and uncritical" (Premiji, 2019, p. 461).

This has been the case with migrant and immigrant workers in Alberta's meatpacking industry, where cultural explanations have largely obscured a focus on the wider "ruling relations" (Smith, 2006) that precipitated the largest outbreak of COVID-19 related to one site (Cargill) in North America.

Rather than seeking cultural explanations, this outbreak must be contextualized within the multiple geographies of exploitation and vulnerability that made such an event possible. This includes examining the intersections between Canada's federal migration and immigration policies, a segmented labour market, inequitable access to occupational health and safety, and modes of regional governance that exacerbate conditions of worker vulnerability.

CANADIAN IM/MIGRATION POLICY

The meatpacking industry has long relied on immigrant and migrant labour to fill jobs considered undesirable by a local workforce. Michael Broadway documented the efforts of Lakeside Packers in Brooks (now JBS Foods) to fill positions at the plants with Canadian workers from Atlantic Canada and British Columbia during the 1990s which was successful for a time, but "once people returned home with tales of what it was like to work in the plant this labour supply soon dried up" (Broadway, 2013, p. 47).

Unable to fill positions with local or Canadian workers, Lakeside turned to immigrant and refugee workers. Broadway documents that between 2000 and 2005 approximately 2,000 Sub-Saharan refugees moved to Brooks Alberta to work at Lakeside. In 2005, packers at Lakeside went on strike to obtain a union contract, with most of the striking workers refugees from Sudan and Somalia, and one of the union leaders Sudanese (Broadway, 2013).

Broadway notes that following the strike, Lakeside's labour recruitment strategy shifted toward hiring workers through Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program. Specifically, the industry was interested in hiring workers "accustomed to physical labor" (*National Post* 2006, WK5 in Broadway, 2013, p. 49).

Temporary migrant workers in Canada endure a specific form of labour "unfreedom" (Strauss & McGrath, 2017) that limits their access to substantive rights in the workplace; and makes them particularly vulnerable to unsafe working conditions (exemplified by the pandemic, though amply evident well before COVID-19). Most significantly, the nature of work visas for *low-wage* Temporary Foreign Workers means that workers are dependent on their employer for their authorization to remain in Canada – radically disincentivizing complaints by workers (Nakache & Kinoshita, 2010).

Today, 70% of workers at Cargill are estimated to be from the Philippines, some are classified as Temporary Foreign Workers, others are Permanent Residents or Canadian citizens. In Brooks, the workforce at JBS Foods (formerly Lakeside Packers) is made up of a significant number of resettled refugees from East Africa – Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia.

This disproportionate presence of racialized workers in an industry known to be *dirty, dangerous and difficult* reflects a wider context of labour market segmentation in Canada (Block & Galabuzi, 2011). Data suggests that resettled refugees in Alberta, for example, often end up working in *low skill* jobs earning less than $20 an hour (Esses et al., 2013). This work often takes place out of the public spotlight, in remote or rural locations, and under conditions where workers struggle to access substantive rights to equitable workplace safety.

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY

Research on occupational health and safety (OHS) reveals that racialized, newcomer and migrant (temporary) workers face structural disadvantages when it comes to occupational health and safety (Lewchuk, 2013). This is largely the result of an occupational health and safety system driven by something called the "internal responsibility system," which effectively means that workers are responsible for ensuring that they are safe at work: It is a complaint-driven system where workers have to assert their rights to safety.

Temporary migrant workers face particular disadvantages in relation to OHS. Temporary migrant workers are vulnerable to a range of workplace hazards including unsafe work conditions, wage theft, exploitation and social isolation (Cedillo, Lippel & Nakache, 2019; Strauss & McGrath, 2017; Tungohan, 2018). They will often hide illness or injury from their employer as they fear being fired (Salami et al., 2018).

Migrant workers who enter Canada through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program face specific challenges vis-à-vis their occupational health and safety. Newcomer workers, including resettled refugees and immigrants, also face barriers to asserting fundamental rights in the workplace. Data on the specific barriers facing racialized and/or immigrant workers is difficult to determine as most of the data collected does not include immigration status or ethnicity. What evidence we do have suggests that immigrant workers face higher rates of injury than Canadian-born workers (Smith & Mustard, 2009).

Fundamentally, a complaints-driven system renders both temporary and permanent immigrant workers vulnerable to

unsafe work conditions – something the situation at Cargill and JBS Foods has brought home all too clearly.

REGIONAL GOVERNANCE

Industrial meat production has been at the center of Alberta's economy as far back as 1887, when rancher-entrepreneurs in Calgary were struggling to create an integrated beef industry (Ghitter & Smart, 2009, p. 628). Indeed, Calgary's contemporary urban geography can be traced back to the locations of original slaughterhouses that divided desirable from less desirable (i.e. downwind from the slaughterhouse) parts of the city (Ghitter & Smart, 2009).

In her study of a Cargill meat processing plant in a small town in Illinois, Faranak Miraftab (2016) found that Cargill benefited from a geography that did not have a strong history of labour organizing (unlike Chicago), was removed from the political and activist culture of more urbanized environments, and that had specific histories of racialization and class formation. Similar conditions define Southern Alberta's meatpacking towns of High River and Brooks. Broadway reports that Cargill was "lured to the province by plentiful supplies of beef cattle, a favorable labor climate and incentives from the provincial government" (Broadway 2013, p. 48).

This *favorable labor climate* is perhaps best exemplified by the Provincial Government's decision to designate the Cargill plant as essential during the COVID-19 crisis. This contributed to the plant remaining open well after early cases of COVID-19 were reported among workers. This is especially notable when we compare the Alberta situation to outbreaks at a poultry processing plant in British Columbia (Agahi, 2020) and at Cargill facility in Quebec (Blaze Baum, Tait & Grant, 2020b). In both cases the plants were quickly shut down, safety measures were implemented, and worker safety was protected.

CONCLUSION

As knowledge of the pandemic grows and it becomes increasingly clear that certain groups of people are more vulnerable to contracting the virus than others, it is critical that we "keep the institution in view" (McCoy, 2006). This means attending to the wider political economy and multiple geographies of COVID-19 and its spread. Rather than narrowly focusing on "culture," we need to view "affliction as the embodiment of social hierarchy." (Premji, 2019, p. 461).

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