

Canada's Vidéotron strike underscores need for working class political struggle

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The bitter five-month-long strike mounted by the 2,200 employees of the Quebec cable company and Internet provider Vidéotron has reached a turning point. If the strike is not to be isolated and defeated the Vidéotron workers must adopt an entirely new strategy based on the independent political mobilization of the working class.

Quebecor, the media and publishing giant that took over Vidéotron two years ago, has employed all the means at its disposal, including the hiring of scabs, to impose major concessions: \$50 million in cuts to wages and benefits and the elimination of almost 1000 jobs.

The connections of Quebecor with the political and financial establishment are numerous. Luc Lavoie, the official spokesperson for Vidéotron, was a top advisor to Brian Mulroney during his years as Canada's Tory prime minister. Mulroney himself sits on Quebecor's board of directors and Quebecor's principal investment partner is the *Caisse de dépôt et de placement* (the Quebec Pension Fund), a Quebec government institution.

Fearing that Vidéotron—one of the crown jewels of Québec's "new economy"—would fall into the hands of the Toronto-based publishing and cable giant Rogers Communications, the *Caisse* put all its financial weight behind Quebecor's rival takeover bid. Ultimately, Quebecor prevailed over Rogers, purchasing Vidéotron for \$4.9 billion, the largest corporate takeover in Quebec history. The intervention by the *Caisse* to ensure Québécois ownership of Vidéotron was strongly supported, if not carried out at the behest, of the nationalist Parti Québécois (PQ) provincial government.

Not surprisingly, the PQ government and Quebec state are solidly behind Quebecor in its assault on the Vidéotron workers' jobs and working conditions. The courts were quick to grant injunctions strictly limiting the number of picketers, so as to ensure the strikebreaking operation could go forward unimpeded. And Quebec Premier Bernard Landry personally intervened at the beginning of the conflict in order to laud Quebecor's CEO and principal shareholder Pierre-Karl Péladeau as a "good corporate citizen."

The company's most recent act of intransigence has been to refuse to return to the negotiating table since the striking workers resoundingly rejected its last offer in a secret-ballot

vote in mid-August. This offer—in reality an ultimatum—contained new concession demands, most notably a reduction of 50 percent in the compensation package offered to workers whose jobs are being contracted out.

In an attempt to lay the blame for the breakdown of negotiations on the backs of its employees, Quebecor has cynically pointed to several alleged acts of vandalism against its installations in order to depict the strikers as violent, anti-social elements with whom no discussion is possible.

Despite the frontal assault mounted by the company, the leaders of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ) do not hide that their objective is to assure Vidéotron's survival at the expense of the workers. "We will save this company," proclaimed FTQ President Henri Massé recently. The union has repeatedly offered to make significant contract concessions, only to be rebuffed by management demands for still greater wage and job cuts.

One only has to consider the international economic context in order to realize that the union's corporatist perspective, which ties the fate of workers to that of "their" employer, is in fact fatal to their interests.

The acquisition of Vidéotron was accomplished during the boom in the value of information technology and telecommunications stocks, when unprecedented rates of return were predicted for those companies that led the "convergence" of the media and telecommunications sectors. The worldwide plummet in share values during the last year, particularly in the domain of high technology, has triggered an international economic crisis, dragging down Vidéotron and Quebecor in its wake.

The enormous debt Quebecor accumulated in purchasing Vidéotron and the ferocious competition to attract global capital are the true roots of the current conflict. Luc Lavoie stresses: "The world has changed ... we're evolving in a competitive universe and ... our rivals are extremely competitive."

The experience of workers at Quebecor is not unique. Around the world, workers and their families are bearing the brunt of the crisis in the profit system, as it manifests itself in the spectacular collapse of companies only recently judged to be

key global players like Enron, WorldCom, Nortel Networks, Deutsche Telekom, Vodafone and Vivendi Universal. In all these cases, the CEOs and major investors have emerged relatively unscathed while workers in the tens and hundreds of thousands are losing their jobs and frequently their pensions and life savings which were invested in the failed companies.

Now more than ever, the struggle to defend jobs and working conditions must be tied to an explicit rejection of the demands of big business and their political representatives that workers except the exigencies of the capitalist market and to a conscious political struggle for a new type of society in which the fulfillment of social needs will not be subordinated to the profits of a tiny stratum of investors.

The union officialdom at Vidéotron, by contrast, seeks at any price to convince its membership that all militant action puts the survival of the company at risk. This submissive stance in the face of a ferocious employer assault is not just unexceptional; it conforms with the experience of workers during the last two decades across Canada and around the world. In response to the bourgeoisie's ever-deepening offensive against the working class, the union bureaucracy has sought to defend its privileged position by transforming the unions from instruments for the defense of the immediate economic interests of workers into instruments for imposing the anti-social agenda of big business.

The experience of workers at Vidéotron painfully confirms this analysis. The union leadership has not so much as raised a finger to mobilize the support of other sections of the working class, contenting itself instead with an amorphous appeal to consumers for a boycott of Vidéotron. But fearing that Vidéotron's balance sheet will be hurt if it loses subscribers, CUPE and FTQ don't even want to publicize their boycott!

Even more scandalous is that Vidéotron is maintaining some of its operations using a subcontractor whose workers are themselves FTQ members. Never has there been any question of the FTQ calling on these workers to refuse to perform scab labor for Vidéotron.

Last but not least, the company which Vidéotron is attempting to use to eliminate hundreds of jobs at Vidéotron was itself founded by the FTQ's investment arm, the so-called Solidarity Fund. A few days after the strike began last May, Quebecor announced the sale of Vidéotron's repair and installation arm, transferring 600 technicians to Alentron, a company created just before the strike in order to "catch" the technicians and subcontract them back to Vidéotron. Alentron is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Entourage, which was created in 1996 by the Solidarity Fund, when the telephone giant Bell Canada negotiated with the union to contract out 1,000 technician jobs. Having been axed by Bell, the technicians were hired by the union-created Entourage to do the same work as before, but with significant reductions in pay and working conditions. Bell has since purchased controlling interest in Entourage, but the wages remain well below those at the telephone giant. No

wonder Vidéotron is intent on following suit.

Quebecor has said that technicians transferred to the new Entourage subsidiary Alentron will receive their current annual salary for one year, but their workweek will be increased from 35 to 40 hours. After that, their salaries will be renegotiated with Alentron's management, which no doubt will demand that the former Vidéotron workers accept wages on a par with the other Entourage technicians. This will mean pay cuts in some cases of more than half, since the Vidéotron technicians make from \$17 to \$29 per hour, while those at Entourage make about \$12 an hour.

The integration of the unions into the apparatus of capitalist management is of a piece with their political subordination of Quebec workers to the big business Parti Québécois. In the name of eliminating Quebec's budget deficit, the unions have worked alongside the PQ government to impose massive public sector spending and job cuts. Throughout the Vidéotron conflict, the union leadership has multiplied its appeals—not to the working class—but to the PQ government, which through the *Caisse* is an accomplice of Quebecor's strikebreaking campaign.

Many Vidéotron strikers sense that the union leadership has no viable strategy to win the strike and are suspicious of its actions. One expression of this rank-and-file alienation has been the implication of a handful of workers in petty acts of vandalism. Although these actions are the outcome of the treachery of the union bureaucracy, whose betrayals have left workers frustrated and anxious to defend their jobs, it must be recognized vandalism represents no alternative. In addition to playing the company's game, justifying its appeals to the courts and the police, it is an individualist response to a class conflict that can only be successfully waged with a perspective based on the independent mobilization of the working class.

The working class has need of a new perspective, and a new political organization capable of expressing its objective interests. Strikes and other forms of militant action are necessary weapons in the arsenal of the class struggle. But taken by themselves, they are not capable of warding off the assault on jobs and workers' rights. They must be combined with a political struggle by the working class, not merely against this or that employer, but against the profit system in its entirety.



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