

10 March 2003

Below we publish an English translation of an exchange concerning the almost year-long strike against Vidéotron, a Quebec-based cable distributor and internet provider. Vidéotron is a subsidiary of the media and telecommunications giant Quebecor.

To Whom It May Concern,

I was doing research on the internet and came upon your site by accident. I am an employee of Vidéotron, on strike since the 8th of May [2002], and it is only in my soul and conscience that I can allow you to make this commentary. It is very commendable that you would try to comprehend the conflict that we are experiencing, and that you would share your opinions with your readers. But it would be preferable for you to relate verified facts instead of stories gathered from the daily newspaper. There were not 649 technicians who were sold to Alentron but 649 jobs, including quality control, distribution, and technical services. When you write that we struggle only in the courts and do not solicit the aid of other unions, it might be better if you verified this with the SCFP [Syndicat canadien de la fonction publique/Canadian Union of Public Employees] in order to get the list of demonstrations held with the support of other unions (mostly part of the Quebecor empire), as well as the list of assistance offered by our friends. I'm thinking here of the Hydro-Québec workers, among others, who have offered us monetary aid and who have not neglected to demonstrate with us when they have the chance.

You speak of the union as though we were worse than helpless and as if it did not understand what we experience at work, but our union executive is doing exactly what we have demanded that they do, and is limiting itself to these requirements. We struggle as those who understand the civilized way. Maybe this is not enough for you, but your opinion, at least to me, is merely a heap of words without foundation, words of someone who doesn't live them and who hides comfortably behind grand principles and behind their computer.

Regards,

Martin D.

A Vidéotron worker

Dear Martin D.,

I presume, since you yourself are directly implicated in the bitter conflict that has raged at Vidéotron since last spring, that you are ready to approach a discussion of this conflict with all the seriousness that the situation demands.

After all, what is at stake is not the reputation of this or that union, but rather the employment and working conditions of two thousand workers, and beyond that, the working conditions and the standard of living of all workers. For one must not have any illusions about this: employers all over Quebec and Canada are watching what happens at Vidéotron. Should the strike follow its current course and be defeated, many will try to follow the example that Quebecor and its principal shareholder and CEO Pierre-Karl Péledeau have set in using strikebreakers to impose massive job and wage cuts. On the Quebecor payroll are key members of Canada's political elite, including former Tory Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and former Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard.

Your opposition to the analysis of the conflict that we have presented on the *World Socialist Web Site* amounts (if one disregards the invective like "a heap of words without foundation") to a blind defence of the perspective of trade unionism and more particularly of the corporatist agenda pursued by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL) and Canadian Labour Congress.

Yet the experience of the past two decades in Canada and around the world has conclusively demonstrated that as a perspective for working class struggle trade unionism is utterly inadequate. The unions have proved unwilling and unable to mobilize the working class against an uninterrupted and ever-widening big business assault on jobs, wages, working conditions and public and social services. Consequently, the social position of working people has suffered a drastic decline and the unions themselves have lost millions of members.

The privileged bureaucracy that dominates the unions has transformed them, nominally organizations for the defence of workers' economic interests within the existing socio-economic framework, into instruments that assist the capitalist class in imposing concessions, layoffs and massive cuts to social spending. Time and again, the unions have joined the corporate bosses in demanding workers accept jobs and wage cuts so as to ensure "corporate competitiveness." In the case of Vidéotron, CUPE has said it is willing to accept contract rollbacks so as to boost the company's bottom line.

The policy of subordinating workers to the corporate struggle for profits, investment and market share goes hand-in-hand with the union bureaucracy's support for the political representatives of big business. In Quebec the unions

politically subordinate the working class to the Parti Québécois [PQ], the big business party that has mounted an unprecedented assault on public services and social programs during its nine years in office. The union leaders actively supported the PQ in imposing these cuts, endorsing the PQ's "zero deficit" objective and actually proposing the early retirement scheme that enabled the government to eliminate tens of thousands of public sector jobs. These cuts have not only meant a significant increase in the workload of those that remained, but also a sharp deterioration in the quality of life of all working people. And in 1999 when the province's nurses revolted against the dismantling of the health-care system, in a strike movement that won massive public support, thereby demonstrating the political isolation of the PQ government, it was the union leadership that intervened to suppress this movement and sustain the PQ in power.

In the Vidéotron strike, CUPE and the QFL have applied the same politics of subordinating the working class to the existing economic and political order to a tee. Within the framework of this letter, it is not possible to repeat all of our analysis, but I will reiterate the following points:

1) The mechanism used by Quebecor for eliminating hundreds of jobs and decreasing the wages of the remaining employees—the sub-contracting to Alentron—was directly inspired by previous betrayals carried out by the unions. Alentron is a subsidiary of the company Entourage. Entourage itself was created in 1996 by the QFL Solidarity Fund as part of a deal with Bell Canada that allowed the phone giant to lay off 1000 technicians, who were then hired by the newly-created Entourage at sharply reduced wages to act as sub-contractors for Bell.

2) The QFL has not lifted a finger to prevent Vidéotron using sub-contractors, whose employees are themselves QFL members, to perform work normally done by the striking Vidéotron workers. In other words, the QFL is countenancing its own members serving as strike-breakers.

3) Throughout the strike, Quebecor has benefited from the support of the union-backed PQ government. It was the Caisse de Dépôt, an arm of the Quebec government, that, at Premier Landry's urging, supplied Quebecor with the financial backing it needed to purchase Vidéotron. Then when the deal went sour, the Caisse encouraged Quebecor in its efforts to boost its rate of return from Vidéotron by launching a frontal assault on Vidéotron workers' jobs, wages and working conditions. PQ Premier Landry has himself gone so far as to laud Quebecor's Péladeau as a "good corporate citizen."

CUPE, meanwhile, has limited itself to an appeal for a consumer boycott—a boycott that the union doesn't believe in and has been loath to promote, because it fears hurting Videotron's balance sheet. Some demonstrations have been organized. But these have not had as their purpose to rouse the working class against Quebecor and its defenders in the PQ and federal Liberal governments. Rather, the demonstrations have

been animated by the perspective that Landry and the PQ need to be pressured to come to the Vidéotron workers' defence. Their real purpose has been to vent pressure from the rank and file for industrial action aimed at stopping Quebecor's strikebreaking. Such action would immediately place CUPE and the QFL in defiance of the courts and on a collision course with the PQ government—which is precisely why the unions have not and will not organize mass picketing or organize sympathy strikes at other Quebecor subsidiaries.

Quebecor's assault on the Vidéotron workers typifies the response of the ruling class and their state apparatus to the onset of a new economic crisis. Having imposed austerity on working people for two decades, they now are intensifying their assault on jobs and working conditions. This is particularly true in the media and telecommunications sectors, where competition is fierce and where the impact of the steep collapse in stock market values has been especially strong. The employees at Vidéotron are facing the same merciless assault as their colleagues at the Canadian Nortel, the German Deutsche Telekom, and the French Vivendi Universal, to cite only a few examples.

The article which has apparently drawn your ire, "Canada's Vidéotron strike underscores need for working class political struggle," indicates a way forward for the workers of Vidéotron and for the working class in general. It elaborates the only perspective capable of transcending the nationalist and pro-capitalist framework of trade unionism: the independent political mobilization of the working class against the profit system and its political representatives. To defeat the global offensive of capital, workers in Quebec and Canada must join with the international working class in a struggle to end the subordination of economic life to big business by placing the principal industries, communications companies and financial institutions under the democratic control of working people. Then the revolution in technique, including telecommunications, could be used to plan economic life so as to provide a decent standard of living, rather than as an instrument for slashing jobs and increasing the exploitation of working people.

For an exhaustive analysis of the historical evolution of the unions, please see the following lecture: Marxism and the Trade Unions

Sincerely,

Jacques Richard, for the WSWWS



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact