

Quebec: Lockout of workers at Rio Tinto Alcan smelter in third week

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Rio Tinto Alcan, the world's largest producer of aluminum, has locked out 750 production and office workers at its Alma, Quebec smelter since December 31. Management imposed the lockout shortly after the workers rejected Rio's final contract offer by a margin of 88 percent and gave a 95 percent strike mandate.

While the company is seeking various rollbacks, the key issue in dispute is the company's ever-increasing recourse to contracting out. Management has steadfastly refused to guarantee a minimum number of unionized jobs at the Alma smelter.

According to the Montreal daily *La presse*, Rio Tinto Alcan planned to increase the number of hours of contracted-work at the Alma smelter in the coming year to 350,000 from 140,000 in 2010.

Since the lockout began, Rio Tinto has operated the Alma smelter at one-third capacity and has vowed to continue doing so until the dispute ends.

The company claims that it is maintaining production using existing management personnel. But after witnessing unidentified personnel being helicoptered into the plant, the union—the United Steelworkers (Syndicat des travailleurs de l'aluminium d'Alma)—is accusing management of using strikebreakers. It has registered a complaint with the Quebec Labour Department, charging that Rio Tinto Alcan is violating Quebec's "anti-scab" law.

The Alma dispute is one of a series of recent conflicts where, in the context of the world economic crisis, Canada's ruling elite has sought to maintain and expand profits at the expense of gains, such as uniform wages and defined pension benefits, that the working class wrenched from most employers decades ago.

At the same time that the Alma workers are struggling to defend their jobs and working conditions, 400 workers at the Electro-Motive Diesel factory in

London Ontario face a lockout by their employer, a subsidiary of Caterpillar, over demands for a 55 percent wage cut and the elimination of pensions.

In 2011, the federal Conservative government of Stephen Harper intervened directly in two major conflicts, helping impose cuts in wages, pensions, and working conditions at Canada Post, the largest federally-owned Crown Corporation, and at Air Canada, the country's largest airline. Since 2008, huge concessions have been imposed upon auto workers.

In each of these struggles, workers have been left isolated by the trade unions, which have refused to mount the slightest struggle against business' determined assault on jobs and worker-rights.

The United Steelworkers local in Alma, affiliated with the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), Quebec's largest union federation, has repeatedly voiced its willingness to negotiate with the employer, even though it is clear that the only negotiation acceptable to Rio Tinto Alcan is to determine what level of sacrifice workers must make. "I think that the two parties should sit down and try to untangle this impasse," declared FTQ President Michel Arsenault.

Yesterday, more than two weeks after the lockout began, the website of the 600,000-member FTQ still hadn't even posted a report on the lockout on its front-page.

As for the Steelworkers, its Quebec director, Daniel Roy, made a visit to Alma on January 12, during which he pledged that the union would conduct an international campaign of solidarity with the Alma workers. The USW has a long-history of such paper campaigns, which usually consist of soliciting messages of support and token financial donations from USW locals and other unions.

Far from serving as a means of mobilizing the

industrial and political strength of the working class, such campaigns serve as an alibi for inaction. Moreover, they are invariably tied to futile and reactionary appeals to the very politicians who are implementing big business' agenda to come to the workers' aid.

In 2009-10, the USW did nothing to organize industrial action in support of locked out miners at Vale-Inco's giant Sudbury operations and when the workers themselves organized mass picketing to prevent the entry of scabs, USW officials ordered them to disband.

In solidarity with the locked out Rio Tinto Alcan workers, railway workers on the Roberval-Saguenay line have twice refused to cross the Alma workers' picket line to deliver loads of unprocessed aluminum oxide. However, in the absence of any backing from the USW and the other unions in the highly industrialized Saguenay-Lac St. Jean region, the railway workers have had to restart the deliveries for fear of losing of their jobs. For having courageously supported the Alma workers, ten train operators have been suspended for five days without pay.

In fighting for their jobs and rights, the Alma smelter workers confront not just the giant conglomerate Rio Tinto Alcan, but also the Quebec government, the courts and the media.

At the start of the conflict, Rio Tinto demanded and was quickly granted a court injunction, so as to prevent workers from blocking access to the smelter. Last week the injunction was prolonged until April.

The union has demanded that the provincial Liberal government of Jean Charest prevent Hydro-Quebec, the government-owned power utility, from buying back electricity which will go unused by Rio Tinto Alcan during the conflict. The production of aluminum requires a huge amount of electricity and Rio Tinto has a preferential agreement with Hydro-Quebec. But Quebec Minister of Natural Resources Clement Gignac has refused to intervene.

The reality is Quebec's Liberal government wholeheartedly supports Rio Tinto Alcan. One of Charest's first acts on coming to power in 2003 was to amend the Labour Code to facilitate the hiring of contract labour.

As is almost always the case in such conflicts, the corporate media are deploying their army of commentators and editorialists to attack the workers.

The media is presenting the Alma workers as spoiled children who should be thankful to have a job in the current economic climate, while defending the employer's prerogative to make massive profits.

A fact almost never mentioned by the press is that Rio Tinto Alcan made \$7.5 billion in profits in the first half of 2011, a period of worldwide economic turbulence.

The Steelworkers and FTQ preach subservience to the courts and big business political parties like the Liberals, PQ and NDP and are opposed to any serious mobilization of the working class against corporate giants like Rio Tinto Alcan, because they cannot and will not challenge the subordination of economic life to the corporations' pursuit of profits.

If they are to prevail over Rio Tinto Alcan, the Alma smelter workers must seize the leadership of their struggle from the pro-capitalist unions, by building independent rank-and-file committees, rejecting the straitjacket of the pro-employer collective beginning system, and by making their struggle the spearhead of an industrial and political offensive of workers across Quebec, Canada, and North America in defence of jobs, decent wages, pensions and public services.



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