

Aluminum giants lock out one thousand ABI workers in Quebec

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Aluminerie de Bécancour Inc., a joint venture of two of the world's largest aluminum producers, locked out 1,030 workers at its Bécancour, Quebec aluminum smelter early Thursday morning.

Management imposed the lockout shortly after the workers rejected, by a massive majority of more than 80 percent, what the company described as its "final offer"—a proposal for a concessions-laden contract.

The second largest aluminum smelter in North America, with an annual output of 450,000 metric tonnes, Aluminerie de Bécancour (ABI) is 75 percent owned by Alcoa and 25 percent owned by Rio Tinto Alcan.

Alcoa has said that the workers will remain locked out of the plant until further notice and that management will continue to operate one of the smelter's three potlines.

Workers affiliated with United Steelworkers (USW) Local 9700 are currently picketing the ABI smelter, which is located about halfway between Montreal and Quebec City. According to a union official, about a hundred workers breached security Thursday morning, entered the plant and staged a brief sit-in inside the cafeteria. Management has hired private security guards to intimidate workers and prevent any disruption of production.

Negotiations started last September on an agreement to replace the five-year contract that was to expire November 22. On the day the contract expired, workers rejected ABI's contract proposals and gave the union leadership a powerful 97 percent strike mandate. But the USW refused to launch strike action, insisting that a "negotiated settlement" was possible and signalled its readiness to accept concessions.

Talks broke off only in late December after ABI negotiators tabled their so-called final offer. After that

offer was decisively rejected by the rank-and-file this week, the USW urged the company to resume negotiations. But instead it locked out the workers, in what the union termed a "bodyblow," imposed "without warning in the middle of the night."

The union has not publicly outlined ABI's contract demands in full, but it has been revealed that management is seeking to force through sweeping pension cuts.

Initially, ABI demanded that more recent hires be forced into a defined-contribution pension plan, creating a two-tier pension system. Under defined-contribution plans workers have no guaranteed minimum pension benefit on retirement and bear all of the financial risk on the investment of the monies set aside for their retirement.

Apparently, in its final offer, the company went even further, seeking to impose a new, entirely worker-funded pension plan "without any distinction according to seniority."

ABI is also demanding concessions on seniority rights, particularly in respect to staffing. The joint venture currently employs about 400 younger or low-seniority workers. This includes students who are paid almost \$10 per hour less than regular workers.

As the contract deadline approached, the company successfully petitioned the *Tribunal administratif du travail* (Quebec Labor Board) for an injunction ordering workers to "stop or refrain from slowing the plant's activities." That injunction was still in effect this week when management imposed its lockout.

Alcoa and Rio Tinto are both huge transnational corporations. They made vast profits from the resources boom of the first decade of this century, while using their global reach to drive down labour costs through a relentless push for speed-up, worker concessions, and

tax breaks.

Now they are citing increased corporate competition to demand even bigger worker givebacks.

While ABI has not publicly threatened to close the smelter, which was opened in 1986, it has suggested that its future is at risk. Management urged workers to accept its “final offer” so as to “ensure the sustainability of the smelter in the future.”

The lockout will have a major impact on the local economy, as ABI is the largest private employer in the Mauricie and Centre-du-Québec regions, and its economic activity supports many jobs indirectly.

The USW has for decades pursued a corporatist, pro-company policy, accepting job cuts and concessions in the name of assuring employers’ “international competitiveness” and “saving” “Canadian,” “Quebec” and “American jobs.”

The union is now manoeuvring to shut down the ABI workers’ anti-concessions struggle. While deploring the lockout, USW Local 9700 President Clément Massé, declared, “Our position has not changed. Our door is always open to negotiate in good faith, to ensure the smooth running of this factory.”

The USW in Quebec is closely allied with the big business Parti Québécois. In both Canada and the US the USW bureaucracy is closely collaborating with the Trudeau Liberal government and the Trump administration in the NAFTA “renegotiation,” hoping to use it to fashion protectionist steel and aluminum tariffs that target European, Chinese, and other overseas workers. In this the USW is continuing its long association with Trump’s billionaire Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, who made a fortune, working with the USW apparatus to reorganize the steel industry at the expense of workers’ jobs, wages and pensions.

To successfully prosecute the struggle to defend their pensions, other social rights and jobs, the ABI workers need to take their struggle out of the hands of the USW and appeal to aluminum and other workers in Canada and internationally for a joint struggle against *all* concessions and job cuts.



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