

# Lockout of Quebec aluminium workers at ABI plant enters third week

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As the lockout of 1,100 workers at the ABI aluminium smelter (*Aluminerie de Bécancour Inc.*) enters its third week, it has become clear that the company has no intention of backing down from its demands for a major and regressive restructuring of pensions and the gutting of key seniority rights. According to the union, negotiations have completely stalled.

The lockout is already having a major impact on the entire Bécancour/Trois-Rivières region in central Quebec. MBI, an important subcontractor for ABI, has recently sacked 80 permanent workers who were assigned to the ABI plant. It is estimated that about 150 ABI suppliers and subcontractors are affected by the lockout.

The second largest aluminum smelter in North America, ABI is 75 percent owned by Alcoa and 25 percent by Rio Tinto Alcan. Management personnel are still operating one of the smelter's three potlines, but workers suspect the company is using scab-labour at the plant, in contravention of Quebec's "anti-scab" law.

The courts recently issued an injunction in favour of ABI which limits the number of workers and their supporters allowed on the picket line at any one time to just 15. The company has also hired private security guards to intimidate the strikers, by constantly videoing and photographing picketers, and providing round-the-clock surveillance to ensure workers are obeying the pro-company court injunction.

The company locked out the workers on January 11 after they rejected what ABI called its "final" contract proposal. The ABI workers, who are affiliated with United Steelworkers (USW) Local 9700, voted 97 percent in mid-November against an earlier offer that would have allowed the company to ignore seniority in

job allocations and would have imposed a two-tier pension scheme that forced more recent hires into a defined-contribution pension plan. Under this plan, new employees would have no guaranteed minimum pension benefit on retirement and bear all financial risks on the investment of the monies set aside for their retirement.

In its "final offer," ABI proposed a new, entirely worker-funded pension plan for all workers, without distinction of seniority. After ABI employees voted against this rotten deal by more than 80 percent, the transnational company locked them out in a bid to starve them into submission.

While the company cites increased competition to justify its assault on workers' benefits, Alcoa and Rio Tinto are raking in massive profits. In 2016, Alcoa had a revenue of some US\$9 billion. Its current CEO, Roy Harvey, had a total compensation of nearly US\$4 million last year.

As always, the corporate media are completely silent on these obscene profits and are rather seeking to pit the population against the locked-out workers. In a report published last Saturday, the Montreal daily *La Presse* spoke of a "divide between the population and the workers" and sought to incite a race to the bottom among workers by describing conditions at ABI as "enviable."

The attack on the ABI workers is part of a global corporate assault on the social rights won by generations of workers through hard-fought class battles. Whether in manufacturing sectors such as auto and aeronautics or in natural resources, giant transnational corporations are determined to maximize their profits through a relentless assault on wages, jobs and pensions.

In the face of the company's sweeping concession

demands, leaders of the United Steelworkers (USW), which is affiliated to the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL), have signalled their willingness to agree to rollbacks. “We are open. We are ready to sit down and negotiate, anytime. We think we have solutions,” declared the head of Local 9700 Clément Masse.

Even though ABI workers confront the same attacks as their class brothers and sisters throughout Quebec, Canada and the US, the USW has not made any serious appeal to mobilize its more than 800,000 members in defense of the ABI workers. For its part, the QFL, despite its 600,000-strong membership, has not lifted a finger to organize resistance to the lockout.

Instead of appealing to other sections of the working class, the USW leadership is seeking to convince the company’s co-owners and their respective shareholders that the lockout is a bad business decision.

“The shareholders should ask themselves,” said Local 9700 President Masse, “why impose a lockout and put an end to negotiations by making a ‘final offer,’ when the talks were going well. Why provoke a conflict that’s in the end going to cost more than all the union’s demands?”

Acting as an adviser for Alcoa, Masse warned that Rio Tinto could benefit from the lockout at the co-owned ABI and the consequent rise in aluminum prices by ratcheting up production at its other facilities.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* visited the picket line to hear what the locked-out workers had to say about the conflict and to develop a discussion around the political issues it raises. Generally, the workers voiced a great determination to fight and openness toward political discussion.

One worker explained that the refusal to accept changes in the pension plan was driven by their concerns with equity and their desire to pass on a better legacy to the next generation. “For us, the big issue is the pension plan,” she said. “It is important to fight to have the same conditions for all. Poorer conditions for new hires is simply unacceptable.”

Another group of workers invited the WSWS reporters inside their trailer. They gave their opinion on the conflict and expressed anger at the company’s actions. In the course of the discussion, WSWS reporters insisted on the need for a united struggle of workers internationally to defend all jobs and wages. In the same way that companies such as Alcoa and Rio

Tinto organize production and exploit their workforce on a global basis, workers need a global strategy.

The leadership of the USW will never organize such an international worker counter-offensive. Both in Canada and in the United States, the USW has torpedoed working class struggles time and again, conspiring with governments and management to impose concessions and job cuts in the of ensuring corporate “competitiveness,” i.e., profitability.

This is not the result of some “bad apples” in the union leadership, but the outcome of a long process that has seen the pro-capitalist unions transformed into a veritable arm of management. At the turn of the 1980s the nationally based trade unions in every country responded to globalization by integrating themselves into management, openly collaborating with governments and big business to slash labor costs in order to attract investments.

To break their isolation, ABI workers must form rank-and-file committees independent of the union bureaucracy and make an appeal to all industrial workers across Quebec, Canada and North America, and to Alcoa and Rio Tinto workers across the globe, for a common struggle in defense of all jobs and working conditions. This should serve as a spearhead for a political movement of working people against the capitalist profit system.



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