

Quebec: Steelworkers union maneuvering to impose concessions on locked-out aluminum workers

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United Steelworkers (USW) leaders have welcomed a Quebec National Assembly motion calling on the *Aluminerie de Bécancour Inc. (ABI)*—a joint venture of Alcoa and Rio Tinto-Alcan—to resume negotiations with the 1,030 aluminum smelter workers it locked out January 11.

The union has also touted phony claims of support for the workers from various capitalist politicians, most notably Martine Ouellet, a former Parti Québécois cabinet minister and the current head of the Bloc Québécois, the pro-Quebec independence party in the Canadian parliament.

These actions must be taken by the ABI workers and their supporters as a warning that the union leadership is preparing to impose a concessionary agreement, including pension cuts.

Indeed, in interviews USW Local 9700 President Clément Masse has repeatedly insisted that that lock out is unnecessary, because the union had been working with the company to “find solutions.”

“Just before Rio Tinto and Alcoa took the decision to withdraw from the negotiating table, big steps had been made,” said Masse recently. “Discussions had even taken place on renouncing the actual pension plan and replacing it with a new one according to the exigencies of the employer. We also had just begun to address the issue of respecting seniority when changing work assignments.”

In a second interview, with *L'aut'journal*, a monthly tied to the union bureaucracy and Quebec nationalist circles, Masse said the union was ready to be “flexible” on the work assignment issue as well, but could not entirely waive seniority rights.

The Local 9700 leadership gave BQ leader Ouellet a rousing reception when she visited the picket lines outside the ABI smelter in Bécancour, Quebec on January 29.

The next day, Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, the co-leader of the fourth party in the Quebec National Assembly, the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire, visited the Bécancour workers. He called on Philippe Couillard’s provincial Liberal government to suspend ABI’s preferential electricity rate until the corporation returns to the bargaining table, knowing full well that the Couillard government, which has imposed massive social spending cuts on behalf of big business, will do no such thing.

Soon after, Parti Québécois (PQ) leader Jean-François Lisée called for the Liberal government to intervene in the dispute and press for the resumption of contract talks.

According to press reports, Donald Martel of the right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Québec and the representative for Nicolet-Bécancour in the Quebec National Assembly, has been working behind the scenes to encourage the union and management to return to the bargaining table.

Toward that end, the USW is apparently preparing a counter-offer, one containing significant givebacks.

In spreading illusions in Ouellet and her Bloc Québécois, the Parti Québécois’ sister party in federal politics, the USW is continuing the longstanding efforts of the trade union bureaucracy to politically subordinate the working class to the separatist wing of Quebec’s ruling elite. For decades, the unions have touted the PQ as a “progressive” party or at least a “lesser-evil”—no matter that every time the PQ has been in office it has imposed sweeping social attacks and used “emergency laws” to break strikes and impose concessionary contracts by decree.

The PQ last came to power in 2012, when the ruling elite resorted to elections to help defuse the political crisis provoked by a militant six-month long students’ strike that at its height threatened to become the catalyst for a

broader working class challenge to austerity. The union bureaucracy itself pressed for elections and worked with Québec Solidaire to promote the election of a PQ-led government.

Predictably, the PQ, after making nominal concessions to the students, quickly pivoted back to imposing austerity. Two months after taking office, it imposed an austerity budget and the following summer it criminalized a province-wide construction workers' strike.

To distract attention from its anti-working class policies, the PQ mounted a chauvinist anti-immigrant campaign around its so-called "Charter of Quebec values." Soon after, it welcomed none other than Pierre-Karl Péladeau, a billionaire media tycoon notorious for his hostility to unions and worker rights, into the party leadership.

Since falling from power just 18 months after securing a minority government in the September 2012 provincial election, the PQ and the entire separatist movement have passed through an existential crisis. According to recent polls, the PQ is poised to finish a poor third behind the Coalition Avenir Québec and the Liberal Party in the provincial election slated for this fall. The Bloc Québécois, which for close to two decades held the majority or at a least plurality of Quebec's seats in the federal parliament, has been reduced to a rump since 2011.

In a cynical attempt to avoid another electoral debacle, the PQ and BQ are now making a feint to the left, claiming to favour "reinvestment" in public services and to oppose further tax cuts for the rich. It is in this context that Ouellet visited the ABI picket line.

But Ouellet was only able to display her hypocrisy. "I think that I don't understand this lockout," blustered Ouellet while in Bécancour. "This was really a show of force. It's a completely disproportionate measure."

The ABI lockout is far from difficult to understand. It is part and parcel of the assault on the working class being mounted by big business and their governments around the world. In every country, the ruling class is seeking to make the working class pay for the capitalist crisis, through job, pension and wage cuts, speed-up, and the destruction of public services.

With her claims not to comprehend the lockout, Ouellet, with the USW leadership's support, is trying to obscure the role that the PQ, for decades the alternate governing party Quebec's ruling elite, has played in imposing austerity and attacking worker rights.

In reality, the "support" from Ouellet, Lisée and Nadeau-Dubois for the locked-out ABI workers is entirely empty.

They have simply adopted the stance of the union, which calls for the corporation to "return to the bargaining table" to negotiate "in good faith" and jointly decide the concessions to be imposed on the workers.

While the media has gone to great lengths to present the locked out workers as "fat cats," they have received significant support from the local population. Only a few kilometers away, in Trois-Rivières, nurses recently conducted a wildcat sit-in to protest the excessive workload they have to endure because of government cuts to health care.

The ABI workers were locked out after they overwhelmingly rejected the company's "final" offer.

With a \$157 million deficit on its books under the current defined-benefits pension scheme, ABI is determined to replace it with a new member-funded pension plan (MFPP), where all financial risk will fall on the workers. Under such a plan, any long-term deficit would result in pension cuts.

From the beginning of the lockout, the USW has sought to channel workers' anger into futile appeals to the shareholders of ABI's parent companies and representatives of the political establishment.

Workers at ABI should oppose these maneuvers and immediately build a rank-and-file action committee to take the leadership of the strike out of the hands of the pro-capitalist USW bureaucracy. This committee should fight to make the current conflict the catalyst for a working-class counter-offensive in Canada and internationally against the corporate assault on workers' jobs and social rights and for the development of an independent political movement of the working class against the profit system as a whole.



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