

Quebec: Aluminum giants demand steeper concessions from locked-out ABI workers

Laurent Lafrance**22 March 2018**

The owners of the Aluminerie de Bécancour Inc. (ABI) aluminum smelter in Bécancour, Quebec have intensified their assault on the facility's 1,030 production workers, serving notice that they intend to use the now more than two month-old lockout to extort even bigger contract concessions.

At a brief March 8 negotiating session, the transnational aluminum giants Alcoa and Rio Tinto-Alcan, who operate ABI as a joint venture, withdrew the concessions-laden "final offer" they had tabled last December and announced that workers will have to cede even larger givebacks for the lockout to be lifted.

In a display of utter contempt for the workers, company representatives refused to spell out their new demands. Instead, after a brief tirade in which they denounced the workers for supposedly imperiling the smelter's "competitiveness," they walked out of the contract talks—the first since last December.

In a subsequent press release, ABI provocatively declared, "The union's rejection of the equitable and competitive (company) offer, leaves ABI management no choice but to take measures to protect the factory's employees and assets. Consequently, the rejected offer can no longer serve as the basis for a settlement. ... ABI's operational structure must be re-evaluated with the aim of significantly improving productivity and the organization of the workforce ..."

The company said it had only agreed to meet with United Steelworker (USW) negotiators because of a commitment it had given the Quebec Labour Minister at the beginning of February.

If ABI's owners feel emboldened to renege on their December offer and demand still greater concessions, it is because the USW leadership has systematically isolated the Bécancour workers.

Instead of making the ABI workers' struggle against pension cuts, speed-up and other contract concessions the spearhead of a broader working class counteroffensive in defence of jobs, wages, working conditions and public services, the USW has made futile and reactionary appeals

to company shareholders and the big business politicians in the Quebec National Assembly to convince Alcoa and Rio Tinto that the lockout is a bad business decision.

The company's amplified concession demands and implicit threat to keep workers off the job for months to come underscores the urgency of rank-and-file ABI workers taking control of their struggle out of the hands of the USW bureaucrats and rallying support from workers across Canada and around the world.

The USW Local 9700 leadership has repeatedly declared its willingness to collaborate with ABI in imposing rollbacks on workers. These include replacing the current defined benefit pension-plan with an exclusively worker-funded one and gutting seniority rights through the introduction of a new promotion scheme based on "skills" and "performance."

Even after the abortive March 8 bargaining session, Local 9700 President Clément Masse was at pains to proclaim the union's readiness to work with ABI. He appealed to Alcoa and Rio Tinto to give ABI management a "real mandate to negotiate the issues in dispute," adding that once they do, the USW "will be happy to work with them in a constructive way."

In a blatant act of sabotage that underscores the USW's opposition to any serious struggle against the aluminum giants, the USW has just agreed to reopen and potentially extend the collective agreement at Rio Tinto-Alcan's Alma, Quebec facility (even though the existing contract only expires in 2020). The company claims it will make an important investment in the facility, but needs changes to the contract—read concessions—to ensure its long-term "competitiveness" or profitability first.

Any organization seeking to lead a genuine struggle in defence of workers' wages and conditions would have responded to Rio Tinto's blatant attempt to pit the Alma workers against their brothers and sisters at ABI by appealing for workers at Rio Tinto-Alcan and Alcoa facilities across the country and globally to strike in solidarity with the ABI workers. Such an appeal would meet with a powerful response from aluminum workers eager to

launch a counteroffensive against decades of concessions. Workers at a Sept-Isles, Quebec facility owned by the mining company IOC and organized by the Steelworkers recently voted to strike to fight concession demands, including against the introduction of a two-tier pension plan for new hires.

But the USW is implacably hostile to such a development, seeing itself as a loyal partner of the corporations and capitalist state, whose task is to smother working class opposition and ensure corporate profits.

USW Local 9490 president Alexandre Fréchette declared that the union would approach the contract reopening at Alma “with an open mind.” Adopting the language that USW’s and other union bureaucrats have adopted time and again in pushing through wage and job cuts, Fréchette added, “We are ready to consider modifications and an extension, as long as everyone is a winner.”

The lockout at ABI is part of a big business offensive around the world, in which companies are seeking to boost profits and investor returns by destroying what remains of the social rights generations of workers won through the mass and revolutionary struggles of the last century.

As they jockey among each other for market share and the financial support of the banks and billionaire investors, the transnationals are pitting workers against each other in a race to the bottom and using the threat of closures and relocation to impose their diktats.

Rio Tinto-Alcan and Alcoa, respectively the world’s third and sixth largest aluminum producers, are clearly out to impose a major defeat on the ABI workers, so as to set a precedent for their smelters and mines across Canada and internationally.

Yet even as ABI management has declared war on its Bécancour workforce in the name of increased “competitiveness” and “productivity,” the USW is determined to minimize the issues at stake. It insists that an accommodation could have been reached if the company had remained at the bargaining table last December and that the lockout is really just a ploy to get the Quebec government to give it lower electricity rates.

The USW’s collaborationist strategy is bound up with its corporatist and nationalist program, which has nothing to offer workers who want to resist the corporations’ global offensive on workers’ jobs and working conditions.

Over the past four decades, the USW and the pro-capitalist unions as whole have abandoned all traditions of militant struggle, promoted the corporatist lie that workers’ interests are identical with those of the companies that profit from their exploitation, and been transformed into appendages of management in suppressing worker discontent.

The role of the unions as junior partners of big business is

exemplified by the USW’s attitude toward US President Donald Trump’s new tariffs on steel and aluminum.

The USW, which boasted about Canada’s military and intelligence cooperation with the US in pressing for an exemption for Canada from Trump’s tariffs, is now demanding Ottawa work more closely with Washington to wage economic war against China.

In a comment that could well have been made by any pro-militarist, big business politician or industrialist, USW International President Leo Gerard declared, “The United States and Canada have integrated manufacturing markets. In addition, the defence and intelligence relationship between the countries is unique and integral to our security.” Gerard then called on Canada to “enhance its cooperation” with the US to “address global overcapacity in steel and aluminum”—a thinly veiled call for trade war measures against China.

The logic of these positions is that workers should side with their “own” ruling class in the bitter struggle between the major powers for markets, resources and spheres of influence that is not only resulting in trade war, but laying the basis for all-out military conflicts on a scale not seen since the two world wars of the last century.

Workers at the ABI smelter have no interest in becoming cannon fodder in the conflicts of competing capitalist states and should reject the USW’s nationalist poison with the contempt it deserves. To beat back the concessions demanded by the corporate bosses and mount a struggle for decent-paying and secure jobs, they should elect an action committee to lead the struggle independently of the USW bureaucracy. ABI workers should appeal for support from industrial and public sector workers across Quebec and the rest of Canada, and make contact with fellow workers in the United States and internationally to initiate a joint counteroffensive against the steel and aluminum bosses.



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