

Lockout at Quebec aluminum smelter enters sixth month

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Over 1,000 workers at the Aluminerie de Bécancour (ABI) aluminum smelter in Bécancour, Quebec—a joint venture of the aluminum giants Alcoa and Rio Tinto-Alcan—have entered their sixth month of lockout.

The workers are determined to resist ABI's concessions demands. But the United Steelworkers (USW) has not lifted a finger to mobilize the working class in Quebec, across Canada and internationally in the ABI workers' defence or to make their struggle a rallying point for opposition to the big business assault on jobs, wages and working conditions.

On the contrary, the union has repeatedly signalled its readiness to make concessions. Soon after the lockout began, USW Local 9700 President Clément Masse said the union had agreed in principle to the replacement of the current defined benefit pension plan with an exclusively worker-funded one, and was prepared to accept modifications to seniority rights. Only, complained Masse, management's proposals for allocating jobs solely based on "skills" and "performance" went too far.

Now the USW has launched talks with the company, with Lucien Bouchard, a former Parti Québécois (PQ) premier of Quebec and notorious defender of big business interests, serving as mediator.

Both sides have agreed to a complete news blackout during the negotiations, including when and where negotiations are being held. According to Radio-Canada, representatives of ABI and Local 9700 met on Monday, June 4. This was their first face-to-face meeting since early March, when management provocatively announced that it now deemed the concessions it had demanded prior to locking out the workers in January insufficient, then broke off talks.

Even though the multinationals Alcoa and Rio Tinto pocketed billions in profits last year, they are

determined to extort major concessions from the ABI workers, with a view to increasing productivity and profits and setting new, low-cost benchmarks for their worldwide operations. ABI management and the employer lobby group, the Aluminum Association of Canada, have repeatedly cited lower labour costs in China, a major aluminum producer, as a competitive threat.

How has the Steelworkers union responded to the transnationals' intransigence?

Far from organizing genuine resistance to management's attack, which would require the mobilization of broad sections of the working class in Canada and internationally, the Steelworkers and the Quebec Federation of Labour have systematically isolated the ABI workers.

No attempt was made to link the ABI workers' struggle with the more than two-month strike of 1,300 Iron Ore Company (IOC) miner and ancillary workers in Labrador City and Sept-Iles, Quebec mounted against management demands for cuts to health coverage and the introduction of a two-tier pension plan for new hires. Yet IOC is itself majority-owned by Rio Tinto and the strikers were fellow USW members.

An appeal for support from workers across North America would meet with a powerful response from industrial workers and all sections of the working class. Recent months have seen a wave of teachers strikes in the US, and strikes by auto parts, railway and casino workers, among others, in Canada.

Rather than encouraging the ABI workers to make their struggle part of a broader working-class counteroffensive, the union has directed them to make futile and reactionary appeals to the Quebec government, the PQ official opposition, and the shareholders of ABI's parent companies.

This has gone hand-in-hand with efforts to dismiss the significance of what is at stake in the lockout.

Big business and its political hirelings have been mounting an offensive against the working class for decades. Since the 2008 global financial crisis, this has reached a new level with employers seeking to eliminate defined pensions, slash wages and impose speed-up, and governments pursuing relentless austerity. Yet the USW has presented the lockout as a manoeuvre from out of the blue, and one the company has undertaken not so much to gut workers' rights as to secure better electricity rates from Hydro-Quebec, the Quebec government-owned utility. No matter that Rio Tinto has repeatedly locked workers out in recent years to force them to accept givebacks.

In another treacherous action that demonstrates the union's opposition to any serious struggle against the aluminum transnationals, the USW successfully prevailed on workers at Rio Tinto-Alcan's Alma, Quebec facility to reopen and possibly extend their collective agreement (even though the existing contract only expires in 2020). Rio Tinto has said contract changes—i.e. concessions—are a prerequisite for it to make new investments.

The USW's welcoming of Lucien Bouchard's appointment as mediator should also serve as a warning to ABI workers. As Quebec premier, Bouchard used the traditionally close ties between the union bureaucracy and the big business PQ to impose the greatest social spending cuts in the province's history.

The Steelworkers' attempts to smother the ABI workers' anti-concessions struggle is the result of the pro-capitalist and nationalist perspective that has guided its actions for decades. Like the union bureaucracy as a whole, the USW has become a junior partner of the ruling class, with its leaders having developed interests antagonistic to the workers they claim to represent.

The corporatist character of these right-wing organizations is demonstrated all the more by the USW's support for US President Donald Trump's tariffs on steel and aluminum, so long as Canada is exempted, and the burden of layoffs and mill and smelter closures is borne by workers in China, India, Vietnam and other lesser-developed countries.

Like Prime Minister Trudeau, USW President Leo Gerard has championed Canada's role as a close ally of

Washington in its predatory wars and is urging Trump to pursue a "North America First," rather than an "America First," protectionist policy.

As part of this campaign, and in league with the big Canadian steel and aluminum companies, the USW has urged Ottawa to collaborate more closely with Washington to wage economic war against China and other rivals. In April, the Trudeau Liberal government integrated the USW and other unions onto a committee involving representatives from government and industry to review measures for combatting the dumping of steel on the Canadian market, a measure clearly aimed at China.

The USW recently welcomed the announcement by the federal and Quebec governments of a combined \$120 million investment in a Rio Tinto-Alcoa "green" project. While the project is touted as pro-environment, it will be entirely subordinated to the transnationals' push for greater profits.

If ABI workers are to prevail over Rio Tinto and Alcoa, they must take control of their struggle out of the hands of the United Steelworkers. Workers should form an independent rank-and-file action committee that would appeal for support from industrial and public sector workers across Quebec and the rest of Canada, and reach out to fellow workers in the United States and internationally to initiate a joint counteroffensive against the steel and aluminum bosses.



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