

As lockout at Quebec smelter nears eighth month,

ABI management demands more concessions, job cuts

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Almost eight months after locking out the 1,030 workers at the Aluminerie de Bécancour Inc. (ABI) aluminum smelter in Bécancour, Quebec, its co-owners—Alcoa and Rio Tinto-Alcan—are demanding even more concessions and threatening massive job cuts.

In its “final” offer last December, ABI demanded the scrapping of the workers’ defined-benefits pension scheme and its replacement by an entirely worker-funded plan. Management also sought to gut seniority rights.

On January 11, the company locked out the workers after they overwhelmingly rejected its concessions demand.

In March, when ABI representatives met with United Steelworkers (USW) Local 9700 officials, they provocatively announced that the December “final offer” was no longer valid and that workers would have to accept even more draconian concessions if they wanted to go back to work. They then refused to even spell out what their new concession demands were.

When negotiations finally did resume in the late spring, the union agreed to a news blackout that keeps the membership entirely in the dark not only about the employer’s demands, but also the extent to which the union has already ceded to management.

The few snippets of information the union has released underscore that the aluminum giants are intent on imposing a major defeat on the ABI workers, so as to boost profits and intimidate workers at their facilities worldwide.

According to the USW, the company has said it intends to slash the ABI workforce by 20 percent or more than 200 jobs. Management subsequently confirmed that it is planning to use the lockout to “adjust its organizational structure ... thanks to a wave of retirements.”

In reality, the months-long lockout has already led a

significant number of ABI workers to take early retirement.

This suggests that a major consideration behind the company’s readiness to endure a drawn-out conflict was its desire to slash the ABI workforce.

If ABI management is able to act in such an arrogant and provocative manner, it is due to the criminal role being played by the corporatist, pro-capitalist USW leadership. While rank-and-file workers are determined to fight back, the USW Local 9700 leadership, the USW bureaucracy as a whole and the Quebec Federation of Labour and Canadian Labour Congress, have systematically isolated their struggle.

The USW has refused to appeal for any solidarity action from its hundreds of thousands of members across Quebec, Canada and North America. The union bureaucracy is bitterly hostile to making the ABI workers’ struggle the spearhead of a broader counteroffensive by the working class to overturn decades of wage cuts, speed-ups and concessions and to oppose capitalist austerity.

Dominic Lemieux, assistant to the director of the USW (Quebec), tacitly acknowledged the bankruptcy of the union’s strategy when he admitted that “the little stream that separated the parties in January is becoming a gaping chasm.” USW local 9700 President Clément Masse acknowledged that since ABI made its latest demands, the negotiations have reached a complete deadlock. Last Wednesday, Masse declared that “nothing was happening” and that he hadn’t heard from special mediator Lucien Bouchard in two weeks.

The union has repeatedly signaled its readiness to collaborate with management to impose rollbacks on its members so as to ensure the company’s “competitiveness”—i.e., to boost its profits. “We were

already close to an agreement on the pension plan issue prior to the lockout in January ... and we have since made some overtures to try to resolve the employee turnover issue,” said Masse. “But the employer has responded by backtracking on several issues that were settled for all intents and purposes.”

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 so as to set 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.

Despite such open admissions by the bosses, the USW has sought to to conceal the real motives behind ABI’s decision to impose a lockout. Union officials have claimed, for example, that the company is chiefly concerned with pressuring the Quebec government to obtain better electricity tariffs. The union feigned surprise when ABI imposed the lockout, even though its co-owners have repeatedly used this strategy to extort givebacks.

Instead of seeking to rally support for the ABI workers from workers in Quebec, across North America and around the world, whose jobs and social rights are under similar attack from the corporate elite and pro-big business governments of all political stripes, the USW is focused on issuing pathetic appeals to Alcoa and Rio Tinto’s wealthy shareholders and on acting as corporate counselors for ABI. “Aluminum prices are healthy right now, so each month that this dispute drags on represents lost revenues and profits,” Masse recently declared.

The USW’s determination to isolate and betray the ABI workers’ anti-concessions struggle is emboldening management to go further still. This was illustrated by the comments of Alcoa CEO Roy Harvey, who declared that the company is considering investing in the Bécancour facilities. Such declarations, which carry the implicit threat of a plant shutdown if management doesn’t get its way, have been frequently used to pressure workers to accept concessions. The Steelworkers have a long history of conniving in this blackmail, including in the aluminum industry.

In June, USW leaders successfully prevailed over workers at Rio Tinto-Alcan’s Alma, Quebec facility, forcing them to reopen and possibly extend their collective agreement. Rio Tinto has said contract changes, i.e., concessions, are a prerequisite for it to make new

investments.

The USW’s anti-worker policies go hand in hand with its promotion of right-wing, nationalist politics that divide workers and tie them to trade war and militarism. The union enthusiastically endorsed US President Donald Trump’s tariffs on aluminum and steel imports, merely appealing for Canada to be excluded so as to target the protectionist measures more directly at China.

With Trump refusing to withdraw his tariffs, the USW has now also lent support to Trudeau’s retaliatory tariffs, while continuing to argue that Canada should be exempt because it is a staunch “ally” of the US in its predatory wars and, to use the words of Steelworker President Leo Gerard, “Canadian steel and aluminum” are vital for “US tanks and warplanes.”

In Quebec, the USW, in collaboration with five other unions, is mounting an “anti-Liberal, anti-CAQ” campaign that effectively translates into stumping for the election of a Parti Québécois (PQ) government in the Oct. 1 provincial election. A right-wing, nationalist party, the PQ has presided over devastating attacks on the working class whenever it has held power, including sweeping social spending cuts and the criminalization of strikes.

If ABI workers are to prevail over Rio Tinto and Alcoa, they must seize control of their struggle from the hands of the United Steelworkers. Workers should form an independent 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 all concessions, in defence of public services and workers’ rights.



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