

Alcoa workers in Canada and Australia confront the same employer offensive

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Today, 1,500 workers who have been on strike since August 8 at Alcoa's Western Australia aluminum smelters and bauxite mines will finish voting on a concessionary contract "offer" in a company-imposed ballot. Later the same day, union officials representing 1,050 locked-out workers at ABI—an aluminum smelter in Bécancour, Quebec, that is 75 percent owned by Alcoa—will meet with top Alcoa officials at the company's world headquarters in Pittsburgh.

The timing is not coincidental. The ABI workers, who were locked out last January after they rejected the company's demands for sweeping concessions on pensions and seniority rights, and the Alcoa strikers in Australia face a common struggle against a transnational corporation determined to satisfy investors' demands for ever-greater profits through job cuts, speed-up and concessions.

However, rather than uniting aluminum workers and making these struggles the spearhead of a broader working-class offensive against concessions and job-cutting, the union apparatuses are doing everything to isolate and derail them.

Alcoa workers in Canada, Australia, and around the world face three key political issues.

First, the Australian workers' strike underscores that ABI's decision to lock out its employees in Quebec was part of a globally coordinated drive to increase profits and productivity through the destruction of jobs and workers' rights. This drive must be answered by the elaboration of an international working-class strategy to mobilize workers against Alcoa and the aluminum bosses worldwide.

Second, Alcoa workers in both countries confront trade union bureaucracies that, although thousands of miles apart, adopt the same bankrupt strategy based on nationalism and the subordination of workers' interests to investor profit. Both the United Steelworkers (USW) and

the Australian Workers Union (AWU) are quarantining the struggle against Alcoa from the rest of their tens and, in the case of the Steelworkers, hundreds of thousands of members.

In an attempt to demobilize workers, Steelworker leaders have sought to downplay the stakes of the ABI struggle. Pointing to their willingness to make major concessions, they long insisted that the lockout was "unnecessary" and the result of an employer misunderstanding. At the same time, the USW has attempted to divert the ABI workers into addressing futile appeals to company shareholders and capitalist politicians to pressure management back to the bargaining table.

In Australia, the union opposed strike action for months, calling instead for sporadic and limited walkouts to put pressure on the company during collective bargaining. The AWU sanctioned an indefinite strike only when Alcoa broke off talks and threatened to invoke a reactionary mechanism in Australia's labour laws giving them the right to unilaterally impose the "industry base award"—that is, terms and conditions far inferior to those stipulated in the expired contract.

The common anti-working class stance of both bureaucracies is underscored by their hailing of worthless and hypocritical promises of "support" from the leaders of parties that have played a pivotal role in the ruling-class offensive. The USW lauded the brief picket line appearance late last month of the leader of the Parti Québécois, a party that has imposed savage social spending cuts and broken strikes whenever it has held office in Quebec. Meanwhile, the AWU invited Bill Shorten, whose Australian Labor Party has for decades led the assault on workers' social rights, to address the striking Alcoa workers in Western Australia.

Third, the two struggles, unfolding more than 18,000 kilometers apart, point to the need for Alcoa workers to conduct a unified struggle and expand it to other sections

of the working class in Canada and Australia and around the world. All over the world, workers confront globally organized corporations and a capitalist elite determined to slash jobs, wages and worker rights to further enrich a handful of millionaires and billionaires.

ABI is demanding the elimination of workers' defined-benefit pension plan and its replacement by a plan that would be completely funded by the workers. In the name of greater "flexibility" in job placements, it is also demanding the gutting of seniority rights.

Emboldened by the refusal of the Pittsburgh-based USW International leadership, USW Local 9700, and the Quebec Federation of Labour to mobilize workers in support of the locked-out ABI workers, Alcoa has increased its concession demands. It has repudiated its "final" contract offer of last December and now says that it needs to slash ABI's workforce by 20 percent, more than 200 jobs, to ensure the smelter remains "competitive."

As in Australia, Alcoa-controlled ABI justifies its draconian demands with arguments about "global competition" and the need to increase "productivity." Its aim is to pit workers in different countries and even different facilities in the same country against each other in a race to the bottom.

In this, major aluminum producers like Alcoa and Rio Tinto-Alcan have the full support of the unions, which systematically subordinate the interests of the workers to the imperatives of capitalist profit, and oppose any and all efforts to unite workers' struggles across national boundaries and continents.

This is clearly demonstrated by the response of the Steelworkers and the Canadian union bureaucracy as a whole to the NAFTA "renegotiations" and the US-led descent into international trade war, which, like the trade wars that erupted during the Great Depression, risks being the antechamber to great-power military conflict.

Instead of alerting workers to the class issues behind these developments, warning them of the catastrophic consequences of trade wars and forging unity with workers from other countries to defend the jobs and rights of *all* workers and oppose rearmament and war, the unions in Quebec and Canada are rallying behind the ruling elite. They are enthusiastically supporting Ottawa's counter-tariffs and other protectionist measures aimed at pushing the burden of the capitalist crisis onto workers in the US, Mexico, China and elsewhere.

Serving as junior partners of corporate Canada and the big business Liberal government, Canada's unions, led by

the USW and Unifor, are now agitating for even tougher trade-war measures against aluminum and steel workers in China, India and other "emerging economies."

The Steelworkers have warmly welcomed Trump's imposition, in the name of "national security," of a 10 percent tariff on aluminum imports and 25 percent tariff on steel imports, while arguing that Canada should be exempted. Echoing Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, USW President Leo Gerard has repeatedly boasted that Canadian steel and aluminum are vital for the Pentagon's warplanes and tanks.

Similarly, Australian unions, including the Australian Workers Union, have for years been fueling the campaign against China to promote big business in Australia and divide the working class along national and ethnic lines.

The current struggle of Alcoa workers in Quebec and Western Australia is part of a growing rebellion of workers around the world against the ruling elite's attack on jobs, wages and public services.

To prevail in this struggle, workers need an entirely different strategy—an international-socialist strategy based on the objective unity of workers around the world in a globally integrated economy.

Opposition to Alcoa's offensive can make headway only if workers seize control of their struggle from the hands of the pro-capitalist unions. New organizations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees, must be formed to resist the attempts of the USW and the AWU to torpedo the struggle. These committees should turn to other sections of workers in Australia, Canada, China, and internationally to carry out a counter-offensive involving the entire working class in defense of jobs, wages and public services.

Such a struggle must be animated by a new political perspective. That is the fight for workers' governments that would place basic industry and the banks under public ownership and the democratic control of the workers, so production and employment could be organized to meet social needs, not swell capitalist profit.



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