Quebec: Nine-month lockout continues, as talks at Alcoa's ABI smelter collapse

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The anti-concessions struggle of the 1,030 workers at the ABI aluminum smelter in Bécancour, Quebec is in grave danger.

On October 5, the Quebec government's special mediator, former Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard, announced he was suspending negotiations, because the company—a majority Alcoa-owned joint venture with Rio Tinto Alcan—and the United Steelworkers (USW) are "too far apart."

ABI workers must face facts: the strategy pursued by the United Steelworkers has led them into a dead end. Confident that the union will continue to leave the ABI workers to fight alone, the aluminum bosses have repeatedly upped their concession demands. Yet the USW persists in diverting workers' energies into futile attempts to pressure big business politicians, including Quebec's newly-elected right-wing populist premier, François Legault, and Alcoa and Rio Tinto shareholders to come to their support.

Speaking after the collapse of the six-month mediation-negotiation process mentored by Bouchard, the Steelworkers' Quebec Director Alain Croteau admitted the union had repeatedly "made concessions ... But the employer added so much that even what was settled was no longer settled."

ABI locked out its workforce on January 11, after they had massively opposed management's attempt to eliminate the defined-benefit pension plan and gut seniority rights. Since then, the company has demanded new concessions, including the elimination of 20 percent of the workforce through retirement. The union, without giving details, also stated in early October that ABI is demanding the reopening of the previously agreed upon "management rights" section of the new contract.

ABI workers have powerful allies. In Quebec, as in Canada and around the world, workers are determined to oppose the big business offensive on their jobs, living standards and social rights. In the United States, tens of thousands of fellow members of the USW, including thousands of employees of the multinational ArcelorMittal, have voted to go on strike to oppose the steel bosses' demands for further wage cuts, health-care premium increases and other concessions.

It is to this social force that ABI workers must turn. But the leaders of the United Steelworkers and the Fédération des travailleurs du Québec (FTQ), to which they are affiliated, are dead set against mobilizing their hundreds of thousands of members to defend the workers at Bécancour, for such a struggle would cut across their cozy corporatist relations with the employers and big business politicians.

Until two weeks ago, Alcoa employees in Western Australia were on strike for 53 days to oppose the same employer offensive. But both the USW and the Australian Workers Union were determined to keep the two struggles separate and apart. What the unions fear is that a genuine working-class mobilization in support of the ABI workers would require defying anti-worker laws and court injunctions, including those that have allowed the company to continue functioning one of its three Bécancour smelters, and serve as the spearhead of a working-class counteroffensive against capitalist austerity.

In a transparent attempt to justify its opposition to any class mobilization, the Steelworkers' continue to insist that the lockout is not part of a global drive of the aluminum bosses to squeeze more profit out of workers, but rather a manoeuvre aimed at pressuring the provincial-owned Hydro-Québec to lower ABI's electricity rates.

The aluminum bosses, however, openly boast that

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they are determined to increase productivity, i.e., profits, at ABI so as to ensure the smelter remains internationally competitive.

In a recent press release, ABI said that during the lockout it has been able to test new production methods on the one smelter that it has continued to operate. This experience, it claims, has shown that it can maintain production rates while reducing the number of employees, thereby boosting "profitability" and "ensuring" the Bécancour operation's "long-term viability."

The multinationals Alcoa and Rio Tinto want to make an example of the workers in Bécancour and impose similar concessions and changes in the pace and organization of work at their other facilities in Canada and around the world.

The union is obscuring all this, because it demonstrates the urgency of all Alcoa and Rio Tinto workers joining forces to thwart the efforts of these multinationals to pit workers from different countries against each other and reduce working conditions and employment ever downward so as to swell investor profit.

The high-paid bureaucrats who head the USW agree with the bosses that workers' jobs and wages must be subordinated to capitalist profit. Since the company locked out the ABI workers last January, USW Local 9700 President Clément Masse has repeatedly said that the union has agreed to important concessions, including to the pension plan, and that it is ready to cede more. Masse's only complaints are that the company refuses to negotiate in "good faith" and its concessions demands are too extreme.

Following the collapse of negotiations, the union has launched an email campaign aimed at persuading Alcoa and Rio Tinto shareholders that the lockout is a bad business decision.

This manoeuvre is worse than worthless. It is aimed at demobilizing the ABI workers and their supporters, while underlining the union's concern for the company's bottom-line.

This ploy is completely in line with the corporatist policy that the USW and the trade union bureaucracy as a whole have been pursuing for decades. Since the 1980s, the unions have been systematically smothering, isolating and sabotaging workers' struggles, while working with employers and governments to impose wage and job cuts. Politically, this has been expressed in the unions' steadfast support for parties that have imposed austerity and supported Canada's rearmament and participation in a series of US-led predatory wars. In Quebec, the USW has long been a bulwark of the big business Parti Québécois.

Now the FTQ and USW are offering to work with Quebec's new right-wing populist CAQ government. This includes claiming that Premier Legault, a former Air Transat boss and advocate of privatization, deregulation and social spending cuts, can be pressured into helping the locked out ABI workers reach favourable terms with management.

If the ABI workers' are to prevail in their determined struggle against concessions and job cuts, they must seize control of it from the USW. This requires, as a first step, establishing a rank-and-file action committee dedicated to mobilizing the class strength of the working class against Alcoa and Rio Tinto. Such a committee should seek to rally support from industrial and public sector workers across Quebec, the rest of Canada, in the US, and beyond, as part of the development of an international working-class offensive against all concessions, capitalist austerity and anti-worker laws.

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