

Quebec: Talks to resume in ABI lockout under threat of state-imposed concessions contract

Laurent Lafrance
13 November 2018

Quebec Labour minister Jean Boulet announced last week that negotiations are to resume between the management of the Aluminerie de Bécancour Inc. (ABI), which locked out 1,030 production workers ten months ago, and the United Steelworkers (USW) union.

Boulet made the announcement on his return from Pittsburgh, where he met with senior officials of the aluminum giant Alcoa Nov. 6. ABI is a joint venture between Alcoa and Rio Tinto-Alcan, with the former owning 75 percent of the company and the latter 25 percent.

Negotiations had collapsed at the beginning of October, after the government-appointed special mediator—former Quebec premier and corporate lobbyist Lucien Bouchard—said the company and union were “too far apart.”

ABI locked out the workers, members of USW Local 9700, after they rejected its sweeping concession demands. These included the elimination of the defined-benefit pension plan and the gutting of seniority rights in job placements.

The USW’s systematic isolation of the ABI workers’ struggle has emboldened Alcoa and Rio Tinto to repudiate their “final” contract proposal of last December and demand even greater concessions. During the summer, the union revealed that the company is now intent on cutting the workforce by 20 percent or 200 jobs. In October, the union reported that ABI has repudiated the previously agreed upon “management’s rights” clause.

The USW, according to its own pronouncements, has already agreed to make significant concessions, and to accept job cuts if they are linked to “new investments.”

Now Quebec’s new right-wing Coalition Avenir

Quebec (CAQ-Coalition for Quebec’s Future) government has signaled that it could impose a contract on the workers, if the union does not cede still further ground.

In announcing the resumption of talks, Boulet said that if ABI and the Steelworkers fail to reach a tentative contract agreement by Nov. 30, the new “special mediation” committee he has established, under Bouchard’s leadership, to assist the talks will itself draw up a proposed settlement. This, he added, would be presented to both sides by no later than Dec. 7.

In the case of the workers, the mediation committee proposal would have to be submitted to a rank-and-file vote. Moreover, Boulet has not ruled out imposing a “contract” should the workers refuse to accept what inevitably will be a concessions-filled proposed settlement.

In a radio interview last week, Boulet feebly tried to obscure the government’s support for ABI’s attempt to extort concessions. “It’s not arbitration in disguise,” he claimed. “But, to be sure, it will place pressure on both sides to come to an agreement before Nov. 30.”

Workers should have no illusions. Whether a new contract is reached through the current round of union-management negotiations or imposed as a result of the machinations of the government and its “special” mediation/arbitration committee, it will be filled with givebacks.

Alcoa and Rio Tinto, transnationals that rake in billions in profits, are determined to make an example of the ABI workers and use their contract to set new regressive benchmarks for their installations across the globe.

The company has publicly boasted that it has used the

lockout, during which management personnel have maintained one of ABI's three smelters in operation, to test new methods of production and prove that the plant can function with a reduced labour force.

USW local 9700 President Clément Masse has repeatedly announced the union's readiness to collaborate with management to impose rollbacks. According to Masse, the union had agreed even before the lockout began to the establishment of a new pension plan entirely funded by the workers. More recently, Dominic Lemieux, assistant to the Quebec director of the USW, said that the union is "ready to [accept] job cuts" at ABI "if you bring in new technology and things like that."

The USW bureaucracy's only real complaint is that ABI has spurned its offers, both before the imposition of the lockout and since, to use its services in ensuring the "viability," i.e. high investor returns, of the Bécancour facility.

From the beginning of the dispute, the USW and the Quebec Federation of Labour have done everything to isolate the ABI workers' anti-concessions struggle from workers in Quebec, across Canada and internationally.

Determined to prevent a broader challenge to big business' austerity agenda, which would threaten their cozy relations with corporate North America and the political establishment, the Steelworkers' leadership has presented the lockout as "unnecessary," and attributed it to either a "misunderstanding" or to an Alcoa subterfuge aimed at getting the Quebec government-owned hydro-electric company, Hydro Québec, to provide it with bigger discounts.

The USW has persisted with these claims even as Alcoa sought to extort further concessions from its Australian workers and announced it is shutting down two aluminum plants in Spain.

If the USW has sought to pull the wool over workers' eyes as to Alcoa's motives, it is because to have admitted what is really at stake in the lockout would have pointed to the necessity of mobilizing the entire Alcoa workforce against the employer offensive and turning to the working class as a whole, which irrespective of industry or country is facing a ruthless assault on its jobs, wages and social rights.

Rather than fighting to mobilize the strength of the working class against Alcoa, the USW has at every

point sought to dissipate the energies of the ABI workers in futile appeals to their enemies: to Alcoa and Rio Tinto's boards of directors, to their shareholders, and to the big business politicians.

During the campaign for Quebec's Oct. 1 election, Masse and the Steelworker leadership paraded before the ABI workers the leaders of Quebec's major parties and, whilst these leaders and their parties have either supported or directly imposed austerity on workers, eagerly touted their cynical and hypocritical promises of "support."

When the CAQ, a right-wing, xenophobic party, won the election, the unions immediately offered their collaboration. In line with this, the USW has claimed that CAQ Premier Francois Legault, an advocate of privatization, deregulation and social spending cuts, must be pressured to make good on his promise to "help" the ABI workers.

Now the USW is welcoming Labour Minister Benoit's intervention as "a positive sign."

If they are to prevail over ABI's drive to impose concessions and job cuts, workers must seize control of their struggle from the corporatist USW. They must establish a rank-and-file action committee independent from the union apparatus and fight to mobilize 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.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact