

Locked-out ABI aluminum workers demonstrate in downtown Montreal

Our reporters
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Locked out since January 11 for refusing sweeping contract concessions, aluminum workers from the *Aluminerie de Bécancour* (ABI) in central Quebec demonstrated in downtown Montreal last Wednesday.

The protest, which unfolded under the watch of a large police deployment, began outside the office tower where the Canadian headquarters of Alcoa is located. The US-based aluminum giant owns a 75 percent share of ABI, with Rio Tinto-Alcan owning the remainder. The demonstration concluded at the offices of Hydro-Quebec, the Quebec government-owned utility, which has supplied electricity to ABI at preferential rates throughout the conflict, allowing it to keep one of its three smelters operating using management personnel.

Of the 1,030 locked-out ABI workers, between 350 and 400 made the trip to Montreal. There was a smattering of workers among the 150 other protesters. But most were United Steelworker (USW) and Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL) officials.

The USW and QFL have systematically isolated the ABI workers' struggle. Rather than mobilize the working class in their support, they have diverted the ABI workers' energies into worthless appeals to Alcoa and Rio Tinto shareholders and the big business political establishment.

Wednesday's demonstration was not even announced on the QFL website. The USW likewise did nothing to publicize the protest, let alone to mobilize support from the more than 50,000 workers it represents in Quebec, and from the tens of thousands of USW members who reside only a short distance away in Ontario.

The demonstration fell just two days before a Quebec government-imposed deadline for ABI and the Steelworkers to reach a tentative contract settlement.

Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) Labour Minister Jean Boulet had said that if no agreement was reached

by November 30 he would order the mediation team, led by former Parti Québécois Premier and austerity advocate Lucien Bouchard, to propose a contract; and if that was rejected by the workers in a mandatory vote, to have their terms of employment dictated by an arbitrator. On Thursday, Boulet announced he was extending the mediation deadline till December 21.

In their speeches at the demonstration, USW and QFL officials reiterated their nationalist perspective and appealed to Quebec's new right-wing populist CAQ government led by the ex-Air Transat boss Francois Legault. Quebec Steelworker director Alain Croteau denounced Alcoa as "an American company that want to imposes it rule here." QFL President Daniel Boyer said "the Legault government should bring its weight to bear to ensure that Quebecers stop paying for the multinational aluminum companies' anti-worker offensives."

Supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* intervened in the demonstration, distributing a statement, "The way forward for ABI workers: No concessions, no cuts in pensions or jobs! The struggle must be broadened!"

The statement drew workers' attention to the repeated statements from Steelworkers' officials announcing their willingness to impose concessions and accept job cuts, and how this had emboldened Alcoa to repudiate its own "final contract" offer and demand even greater concessions.

"ABI workers must be under no illusions," declared the statement, "Whether a new collective agreement is concluded as part of the current round of union-management negotiations or imposed as a result of machinations by the government and its 'special' mediation committee, it will be full of concessions."

"To overcome the drive by ABI to impose concessions and job cuts," continued the statement,

“workers must take the leadership of their struggle out of the hands of the pro-capitalist Steelworkers union. They must establish a rank-and-file committee independent of the trade union apparatus and fight to mobilize the strength of the working class against Alcoa and Rio Tinto. Such a committee should actively seek the support of private and public sector workers throughout Quebec, the rest of Canada, the United States and overseas, as part of an international working class offensive against capitalist austerity and anti-worker laws.”

Steelworkers officials responded to the call for the locked-out ABI workers to turn to their veritable allies, aluminum and other workers across Canada and internationally, with slanders and intimidation. Dominic Lemieux, the assistant to the Quebec USW director and other union officials, accosted the WSWS supporters, accusing them of being in the pay of the company, and otherwise sought to incite a confrontation. (See: At ABI workers’ protest, USW officials accost and threaten WSWS supporters)

Nevertheless, the WSWS was able to speak to several of the locked out ABI workers. Jerome, a young worker, said that when he was first hired at ABI he thought Alcoa and Rio Tinto were good employers. But with the lockout he has come to the conclusion all companies “are the same.” He said that in the Bécancour region there are few prospects for good jobs. His partner who works in the healthcare sector also confronts difficult circumstances. “It’s hell! They’re cutting jobs, leaving them to take care of a mass of people.”

A small group of workers spoke with the WSWS about the stakes in their struggle and the necessity to broaden it. The ABI workers’ protest came in the immediate aftermath of GM’s announcement of the closure of five assembly plants in the US and Canada and the elimination of 14,000 jobs, and the day after the Trudeau Liberal government had illegalized the Canada Post strike. The workers recognized that workers everywhere are confronting the same big business offensive. “It’s worldwide,” said one of them. This worker noted that not far from where the demonstration was taking place are the offices of Manulife, where a relative works, and which has just announced that it is cutting 700 jobs across Canada.



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