

As one-year anniversary of lockout approaches

Alcoa intensifies attack on Quebec ABI workers

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With the approach of the one-year anniversary of Aluminerie de Bécancour (ABI) locking out the production workforce at its Bécancour, Quebec smelter, ABI management has intensified its drive to impose sweeping contract concessions.

Shortly before Christmas, Quebec's Minister of Labour, Jean Boulet, announced the collapse of government-facilitated contract talks between ABI and the United Steelworkers (USW), the bargaining agent for the aluminum smelter's approximately one thousand employees. Boulet had set a December 21 deadline for the two parties to reach a tentative agreement and suggested that if they failed to do so Quebec's right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) might impose binding arbitration.

Two days before the deadline, ABI—a joint venture, 75 percent owned by the US-based aluminum giant Alcoa and 25 percent by the mining and smelting transnational Rio Tinto—announced it was halving production from the one smelter it has kept in operation, using management personnel, since imposing the lockout on January 11, 2018.

ABI cited operational reasons for the production cut, including the “departure of several management employees.” But it was clearly meant to signal that the company is ready to sustain the lockout indefinitely, so as to intimidate the workforce into bowing to its draconian dictates.

The production cut will further delay any future resumption of full operations at ABI. Moreover, management had previously boasted that the “new” techniques managers have been using in running the one operational smelter show that ABI can maintain its previous output with up to 200 fewer employees.

Not surprisingly, the leaders of USW Local 9700 publicly condemned the company's action and filed a token complaint with the Quebec Administrative Labour Tribunal for “bad faith bargaining.” But even as he railed against management, Local 9700 President Clément Masse, who has repeatedly proclaimed the Steelworkers' readiness to accept significant contract concessions, indicated the union is ready to cede still more. “On our side,” said Masse, “we are ready to take steps. We recall that we were close to an agreement on December 21 (2017), before the employer decided to close the plant instead of negotiating to find out why its offer was rejected.”

Minister Boulet intervened in the conflict last November, shortly after negotiations under mediator and former right-wing Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard stalled. At the conclusion of a meeting with senior Alcoa executives in Pittsburgh, Boulet announced the resumption of negotiations under a new three-member “special mediation” committee, chaired by Bouchard, and set a November 30 deadline for a tentative agreement. But when that deadline passed, Boulet announced he was extending it to December 21.

Boulet now says he is awaiting a report from the special mediation committee. Previously, he had said that if the ABI contract talks failed he would consider using “alternative mechanisms” to “bring the parties closer together.” These included asking the special mediation committee to submit a “settlement proposal” or imposing binding arbitration. However, in announcing the collapse of negotiations Boulet ruled out arbitration at this point, saying he does not believe he has the agreement of both parties to appoint an arbitrator. According to a *Université du Québec at*

Trois-Rivières labour relations specialist known to have privileged access to ABI management, Alcoa and Rio Tinto could shut down ABI entirely, throwing its entire workforce onto the streets, if arbitration produced a contract not to its liking.

In its “final” Dec. 2017 offer, the company demanded the abolition of the defined-benefits pension plan and the gutting of seniority rights. Last March, ABI withdrew this offer and subsequently tabled demands for even steeper concessions, including a plan to eliminate 20 percent of the workforce through retirements. As it is, the lockout has pushed dozens of workers into early retirement.

If Alcoa and Rio Tinto are able to act so arrogantly and unscrupulously, it is due to the union’s systematic isolation of the ABI workers’ anti-concessions struggle. This was exemplified by the Steelworkers’ refusal to even publicize the demonstration the locked-out ABI workers held in Montreal on November 28—the first major Steelworkers “solidarity” rally after almost a year of lockout.

Far from making the ABI workers’ struggle the spearhead of a broader working-class struggle against big business’ agenda of concessions, speed-up, and austerity, the USW and Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL) have pleaded time and again with management to accept their offers of collaboration. Masse has repeatedly said that the union is ready to accept the introduction of a new pension plan entirely funded by the workers and the weakening of seniority rights. The USW has also said it would be willing to negotiate job cuts in exchange for new “investments.”

The ABI lockout is part of a global offensive by big business aimed at squeezing out ever-greater profits for investors amid mounting capitalist crisis and trade war. Everywhere, workers face cuts in wages, jobs, workplace benefits and public services.

In October, Alcoa announced the closure of two plants in Spain and the loss of 600 jobs. In Australia late last month, Alcoa invoked a reactionary mechanism in the country’s labour laws in an attempt to bludgeon 1,600 workers into accepting massive takebacks. If the workers do not accept concession-laden contracts by next June, the company will unilaterally impose minimum-standard industry agreements that provide for wages 50 percent less than what they currently earn.

A genuine fight against the company requires the mobilization of Alcoa and Rio Tinto employees around the world, as well as other sections of the working class, both in industry and the public sector, in Canada and internationally. But the United Steelworkers, like the Australian Workers’ Union, has no intention of leading such a struggle, because it could quickly escape from their control and become the catalyst for a broader movement against austerity.

The USW’s maneuvers are part of its corporatist policy of collaborating with management in ensuring corporate “competitiveness,” i.e., subordinating workers’ jobs and wages to investor profit. For decades, the pro-capitalist and nationalist unions have integrated themselves ever more completely into corporate management and the capitalist state, imposed concessions and job cuts, and suppressed one workers’ struggle after another. In exchange for these services, the corporate elite has granted the unions control of multi-billion investment funds, while union bureaucrats enjoy high salaries and other privileges. That is why, instead of turning to the true allies of ABI workers—their class brothers and sisters across Canada and beyond—the Steelworkers leaders seek to expend workers’ energies in futile appeals to their enemies: the company’s management and transnational owners, its shareholders, and CAQ Premier François Legault and other big business politicians.

To prevail against Alcoa and Rio Tinto, the ABI workers must break the isolation of their struggle. This requires that they slash through the straitjacket that is the Steelworkers union bureaucracy. ABI workers should establish a rank-and-file action committee independent of the union apparatus, take the leadership of their struggle in their own hands, and rally support from workers in Quebec, the rest of Canada, and internationally for a working-class counteroffensive against all concessions, capitalist austerity and anti-worker laws.



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