

Quebec: Locked-out ABI workers begin second year on picket line

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The lockout of the 1,030 Aluminerie de Bécancour (ABI) production workers entered its second year at the end of last week. Yet the United Steelworkers (USW) and the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL) remain adamantly opposed to making any appeal to workers in Quebec, across Canada and internationally to come to the defence of the ABI workers.

The unions' isolation of the ABI workers' struggle has emboldened ABI's majority-shareholder, Alcoa. In recent weeks, ABI management, acting at Alcoa's behest, has escalated its concession demands, and rebuffed even the attempts of Quebec's right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government to help it impose a concessions-filled contract on the ABI workers.

These developments make clear that Alcoa wants a free hand to dictate when the lockout will be lifted and under what terms.

Shortly after the beginning of the new year, Quebec Labour Minister Jean Boulet announced that the special mediation committee he had appointed in November had failed to find any grounds for a settlement. The mediation committee, which was led by former Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard, "came up against entrenched positions," said Boulet, with the two parties not showing a "real willingness" to negotiate.

Given this, Boulet said that he saw no point in extending the special mediation committee's mandate. Instead he would set up a "group of experts" from the Labour Department to assist the resumption of talks and an eventual settlement.

A corporate lawyer prior to his becoming Labour Minister, Boulet struck a pose of neutrality. But his comments made clear that he and the CAQ government are working to impose the company's diktats. Speaking like an ABI boss, Boulet pointed out that the services

offered by his ministry "can be used" to "redefine work organization to make it more flexible."

As the December 21 deadline for the work of the special mediation committee approached, Boulet indicated that if the negotiations failed, he would ask the committee headed by Bouchard to draw up a "hypothetical settlement" for submission to the two parties. Earlier, he had suggested that the government might impose a contract through binding arbitration.

However, the CAQ government has set both these options aside, at least for the moment. According to Boulet, such pro-active government attempts to overcome the impasse in the negotiations would be "premature."

In reality, Boulet's about-face came in response to company pressure. Media reports indicate that ABI's co-owners—Alcoa owns 75 percent of ABI and the mining and metallurgical transnational Rio Tinto the remainder—threatened, indirectly or possibly even explicitly, to close the ABI smelter unless the government gave them a free hand.

In other words, the aluminum bosses want to starve the ABI workers into submission, so they can wrench from them the steepest concessions and use the ABI contract to set new low benchmarks that can be used to intimidate workers at their operations worldwide.

In the face of this class-war assault, the Steelworkers' union bureaucracy continues to demobilize the ABI workers and channel their struggle into futile appeals to the political establishment and right-wing populist CAQ.

To mark the first anniversary of the lockout, the Steelworkers organized a demonstration in Bécancour on January 9, and invited local legislators (Members of the National Assembly) and mayors to address the workers.

USW Local 9700 President Clément Masse told the few hundred locked-out workers and their supporters who attended the rally, “We need the government to get out of its pseudo-neutrality and restore the balance of power.”

The union wants workers to believe that they are powerless before the company and that their fate is, therefore, in the hands of Premier François Legault, a former millionaire CEO who advocates privatization, austerity and tax cuts for big business and the rich.

But if the ABI workers are now at an impasse, it is not because they are without power or class allies. It is because the Steelworkers and the QFL refuse to call on their hundreds of thousands of members to back the locked out workers and make the ABI workers’ anti-concessions struggle the catalyst for a broader working class mobilization against job cuts, contract-givebacks, and the austerity agenda of the ruling class as a whole.

Contrary to what the union officials would have them believe, ABI workers have powerful allies. They are to be found among the workers across Canada and around the world who are challenging big business’ drive to make them pay for the capitalist crisis through austerity, job cuts and the evisceration of workers’ social rights.

Last week, workers at GM’s Oshawa, Ontario plant, acting independently of the Unifor union apparatus, downed tools in response to the automaker’s confirmation of the plant’s closure. South of the border, thousands of teachers are striking in Los Angeles, California. Meanwhile, in Mexico tens of thousands of workers have joined a wildcat strike in the US-Mexico border town of Matamoros against sweatshop exploitation, and in France the right-wing government of Emmanuel Macron has failed to quell with state repression the “Yellow Vest” protests against austerity and social inequality.

Alcoa’s threat to impose 50 percent wage cuts on its Australian workforce and its recent cutting of hundreds of jobs in Spain following the closure of two plants there demonstrate that the struggle of the ABI workers is international in nature. However, the Steelworkers continue to isolate the ABI workers and present the lockout as a Quebec conflict, limited to the Bécancour plant.

Since the beginning of the dispute, the USW has been begging management to accept their offer of

cooperation in imposing concessions through a “negotiated” agreement. More recently the union has indicated it is open to direct intervention by the anti-worker CAQ government, including the imposition of binding arbitration.

Any contract that is imposed by arbitration or “negotiated” under conditions where the USW has isolated the ABI workers’ struggle will be laden with concessions. Local 9700 President Masse has repeatedly indicated that the union has already agreed to make sweeping concessions, including the introduction of a new pension scheme fully funded by the workers, the weakening of seniority rights, and even job cuts.

Like the entire union bureaucracy, the pro-capitalist United Steelworkers does not stand in the way of employer attacks. Rather, its role is to suppress workers’ struggles and subordinate their jobs and wages to the profit interests of capitalist investors.

ABI workers must not submit to the threats from Alcoa and Rio Tinto. Stable jobs, decent wages and good working conditions are social rights for which generations of workers have fought.

To defeat Alcoa and Rio Tinto, ABI workers must break the isolation of their struggle. This requires the creation of a rank-and-file committee independent of the union apparatus to seize the leadership of the ABI workers’ struggle and rally the support of workers in Quebec, the rest of Canada and the world for a workers’ counter-offensive against all concessions, capitalist austerity and anti-strike laws.



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