

Quebec: USW proposes further rollbacks, after locked-out ABI workers reject derisory company offer

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No sooner had the 1,000 locked-out Aluminerie de Bécancour (ABI) workers voted overwhelmingly to continue their more than 14-month anti-concessions struggle, than the United Steelworkers (USW) signaled anew its readiness to impose a contract full of rollbacks.

On March 21, just 10 days after the ABI workers had massively repudiated management's latest concessions-laden contract offer, the USW Local 9700 leadership submitted a "counter-proposal" that cedes further ground to all the company's key concession demands. While many details are being kept secret, the union claims its proposal takes into account all the main issues that ABI—a joint venture 75 percent-owned by Alcoa—raised during mediation: pensions, the organization of work, personnel transfers, absenteeism, and paid leave for union work.

Flanked by USW Quebec Assistant Director Dominic Lemieux and USW Regional Coordinator Réal Valiquette, USW local 9700 president Clément Masse presented the main points of the union proposal at a press conference.

Virtually every remark from this trio was an avowal of the union's willingness to work with the company in imposing rollbacks and boosting investor profit. "Even though most issues were already resolved prior to the lockout," said Masse, "we have taken into account the new requests made by the company and have addressed them in our counter-proposal. We have even proposed new compromises on some issues, compared to our position during the last round of negotiations."

The Local 9700 president said that the union has agreed to ending the defined-benefit pension plan (where financial risks are assumed by the employer) and its replacement by a new scheme fully funded by the workers. "The member-funded pension plan," Masse conceded, "is a huge concession compared to the former defined-benefit plan, given that the risk is borne by the

workers." Employing the pro-company corporatist language that has become the stock-and-trade of the union bureaucracy, he added, "This allows Alcoa to meet shareholder objectives and remove the pension plan from the liability column of its financial statements."

The union is also proposing the elimination of 103 permanent jobs, or 10 percent of the smelter's workforce, through attrition. Again speaking like ABI's capitalist partner, Masse declared: "This is a responsible proposal that provides flexibility to the employer while ensuring that seniority and working conditions are respected." In fact, these job cuts open the door to outsourcing.

The USW is seeking an eight-year contract, rather than the six years the company has proposed. The union is justifying this offer of long-term "industrial peace" to Alcoa and its junior partner Rio Tinto-Alcan with the claim this would extend for a further two years the average 2.55 percent annual wage increase in the employer's offer. The reality is inflation is already running at about 2 percent and could well spike significantly between now and 2026.

The union's counter-proposal does not include a return-to-work protocol, but Masse said he is ready to negotiate one. In its last offer, ABI provocatively refused to provide any return-to-work schedule and insisted on the right to use managers and subcontractors to do the work of employees not yet called back to work.

ABI acknowledged receipt of the union "counter-offer," but otherwise has refused comment.

Quebec Labour Minister Jean Boulet has said he could still submit his own proposal to settle the dispute if negotiations fail again. Earlier this year, the union appealed to Quebec's right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government to impose binding arbitration, but the government has said it will not do so unless ABI

makes a like request. In a revealing comment, the CAQ Member of the National Assembly (MNA) for Nicolet-Bécancour, Donald Martel, said a government-imposed settlement would “not send a good message to potential investors.”

Meanwhile, CAQ premier and former Air Transat boss, Francois Legault, has blatantly intervened on the side of ABI, saying workers should make more concessions to the company, “considering their very high salaries.”

Even as the USW bureaucrats tabled their counter-offer, they signalled they are ready to go still further, if only the company will agree to make use of their services. In explaining the unions’ proposals Masse said, “we wanted to reach out to the employer.” USW Quebec Assistant Director Lemieux said the union is “now appealing to the corporate shareholders to give a clear mandate to management to negotiate a settlement.”

This is all in keeping with the ruinous course the USW has pursued throughout the more than 14-month lockout. The Steelworkers and Quebec Federation of Labour have systematically isolated the ABI workers’ struggle, refusing to make it the spearhead of a broader working-class offensive in Quebec, across Canada, and throughout North America against concessions, job cuts, speed-up, and austerity.

While isolating the ABI workers from their class brothers and sisters who likewise face a big business-state offensive on their rights and working conditions, the USW has done everything to expend their energies in futile appeals for “support” from Alcoa and Rio Tinto-Alcan shareholders and the big business political parties, including the Liberals, Parti Quebecois and now Legault and his CAQ.

Given this unbroken record of betrayal, it is all the more significant that the ABI workers voted by well over 80 percent in a secret ballot earlier this month to reject ABI’s latest concessions-filled offer and continue their struggle. The USW, it should be underlined, only revealed its own recommendation for a “No vote” at the last minute, ensuring maximum confusion in the days prior to the March 11 mass meeting and ballot.

The determination of the ABI workers to defend their jobs and working conditions is a challenge—if as of yet only implicit—to the entire austerity agenda of Quebec and Canadian big business. That is why the corporate media are vilifying the workers as “*enfants gâtés*” (spoiled kids) and claiming workers in and around Bécancour blame them for the lockout’s adverse economic impact.

In reality, there is widespread sympathy for the ABI

workers’ struggle among working people, and—given that the ABI workers are challenging the class war program of the ruling elite which threatens all working people—far, far greater potential to rally support.

The representatives of big business are themselves quite open about what is at stake in the ABI struggle; that Alcoa and Rio Tinto are intent on imposing sweeping concessions so as to establish a further low-bar mark for the aluminum industry worldwide. Says Bécancour Mayor Jean-Guy Dubois, “This is a battle of the titans, which goes far beyond the labour relations of ABI, of Bécancour, but also applies to all aluminum smelters. It will serve as a model.”

The ABI workers’ struggle is part of a growing upsurge of the working class around the world. The “Yellow Vest” movement in France, the revolutionary upsurge in Algeria, the wildcat strike of workers in Mexico’s cheap-labour maquiladora region, and the struggles of teachers in the United States are all notable examples. And in every one of these cases, the struggles have developed in opposition to the ossified, pro-capitalist union apparatuses.

It is to this growing movement of the working class that the ABI workers must turn, if they are to prevail in their anti-concessions fight. They must seize the leadership of their struggle from the pro-company, pro-concession USW bureaucrats, and through a rank-and-file committee led by the most militant workers, break the isolation of their struggle. This means not just appealing for worker solidarity, but linking the struggle against ABI and the intensification of worker exploitation in the aluminum industry to the development of a working class counteroffensive, mobilizing workers across Quebec, Canada and beyond against austerity, concessions and war.



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