

Quebec premier backs ABI in extorting massive concessions from locked-out workers

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Quebec Premier François Legault has intervened in the 15-month lockout of 1,030 workers at the Aluminerie de Bécancour (ABI) smelter, owned by global aluminum giants Alcoa and Rio Tinto Alcan. Following meetings with company executives and union leaders, the right-wing populist Premier sided unequivocally with ABI and demanded that the locked-out workers cede to management's demands for sweeping concessions.

After meetings on Monday, April 1, the leader of the CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec), the right-wing populist party that has formed the provincial government since last fall, wrote on his Twitter account that "the union must compromise." Legault added to this the following day with fresh tweets, denouncing "a union that asks for too much" and the supposedly exorbitant salaries paid the ABI workers, although wage rollbacks do not even figure in management's concession demands.

Legault's virulent pro-management bullying was quite predictable, coming from a multimillionaire who is himself a former CEO of Air Transat. The premier was also a Parti Québécois minister in the 1990s during the party's sharp shift to the right, and is a strong proponent of privatization, deregulation and ruthless capitalist austerity.

What this reveals above all is the utter bankruptcy of the strategy of the United Steelworkers (USW) and the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL), which have systematically isolated the ABI workers, while exhorting them to expend their energies in appealing to Legault to pressure the company to adopt a more reasonable bargaining position.

Even after their meeting with Legault, senior USW and Local 9700 officials said they were pleased to have had "a good hearing from the Premier" and wished he

would "throw his weight" into the talks. After Legault's anti-worker statements, the union leaders feigned surprise and disappointment, saying they were "betrayed" and finding the situation "difficult to understand."

Legault's open support for ABI's management has emboldened it to press ahead with its class-war assault. Following a meeting with a government mediator April 3, the company announced that it had rejected the counteroffer submitted last month by the union and is maintaining its own concessions-laden March 4 offer, which was rejected by 82 per cent of rank-and-file workers in a secret ballot vote.

In an attempt to intimidate workers, ABI is threatening to stop the limited operations management personnel have maintained at the smelter since the lockout began on January 11, 2018. This will make it more expensive and time-consuming to resume smelting operations and is an implicit threat that the smelter could be closed permanently.

The union's counterproposal, which included major concessions across the board, amounted to a stab in the back for the locked-out workers. It included the adoption of a fully worker-funded pension plan, the elimination of 103 jobs or 10 percent of the workforce, and other changes demanded by the company relating to seniority rights and the organization of work. However, these unprecedented concessions are insufficient for ABI, which is determined to extend the lockout indefinitely to impose its dictates.

The attack on ABI workers is part of an offensive by the ruling elite against the working class on an international scale. In the context of the deepest economic crisis since the 1930s and increased competition in global markets, big business—with the complicity of governments of all political stripes—is

seeking to eliminate what remains of the working class's social gains in order to swell the profits of a handful of super-rich oligarchs.

The trade union apparatuses, entirely controlled by privileged bureaucrats who have developed interests that are opposed to the workers they claim to represent, have no intention of challenging the domination of big business and the banks over society. These organizations long ago renounced any meaningful association with the militant class struggles out of which they were born, and function as employer agencies that work with big business and government to stifle worker opposition and impose wage and job cuts.

In the case of ABI, the United Steelworkers and its Local 9700 have repeatedly expressed their willingness to make more concessions as soon as management is ready to resume negotiations. At a press briefing following the April 3 mediation meeting, Dominic Lemieux, assistant to the Quebec Director of the United Steelworkers, revealed the union's cowardice and submission by stating without any embarrassment: "The union has no demands, it has already opened the door to several givebacks and even a reduction of more than a hundred positions."

Despite Legault's intervention, union leaders are pursuing the same ruinous strategy of appealing to the class enemies of the workers: the government and company shareholders and management. The Steelworkers continue to isolate the locked-out ABI workers, and, as their March counteroffer shows, they are prepared to impose sweeping concessions.

The struggle against ABI, which is also the first direct confrontation between a large group of workers and the CAQ government, indicates what is being prepared for the entire working class. Like the Parti Québécois and the Liberal Party, the CAQ serves the interests of big business and the banks and will mobilize the full power of the capitalist state to maintain their domination over society. On the other hand, the attitude of the unions, which continue to work hand in hand with this anti-worker government, shows that they will turn even more to the right and do everything possible to block a mobilization of the working class against employer attacks and capitalist austerity.

Despite the campaign of lies and slanders by the government and the media, the ABI workers have

powerful allies. There is strong popular support for their struggle among workers who have suffered the same employer attacks on their jobs and working conditions for decades. In opposition to the United Steelworkers and the QFL, which are plotting with management and government against them, ABI workers must establish a rank-and-file committee, democratically controlled by the workers themselves, to take the leadership of their struggle in their own hands.

Only such a rank-and-file committee can break the isolation in which the USW and QFL have straitjacketed the ABI workers' struggle and spearhead a campaign to reach other sections of the working class—not only in Quebec but in the rest of Canada and internationally, including the tens of thousands of Alcoa and Rio Tinto workers in Australia and in more than a dozen other countries.

A broad workers' mobilization to defend jobs, wages and public services must be combined with a political struggle for a workers' government that would fundamentally reorganize the economy to meet the social needs of the majority, not further enrich a tiny bloated elite.



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