

Quebec: ABI lockout in its 18th month

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More than 1,000 workers at the majority Alcoa-owned Aluminerie de Bécancour (ABI) aluminum smelter in Bécancour, Quebec have been locked out from their jobs since early January 2018, or for almost 18 months.

Their anti-concessions struggle has been systematically isolated by the United Steelworkers (USW) union and the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL), whose strategy of pleading to the company and successive big business provincial governments to settle the dispute has led the workers into a blind alley.

The USW leadership has sought to cover up the real issues at stake in the lockout, painting it as a misunderstanding, and they have promoted the lie that Quebec's right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government and its premier, former Air Transat CEO and multi-millionaire François Legault, can be pressured into intervening on behalf of the ABI workers.

For months after the CAQ's election in October 2018, the union urged Legault to "intervene" in the dispute. But predictably, when he did so, he unreservedly backed the company. In public comments and tweets the premier has repeatedly denounced the ABI workers' "exaggerated" demands—although all they want is to maintain the provisions of the previous contract. And when his government tabled its own proposed "settlement," it not only incorporated ABI's concession demands; it proposed management be given even greater leeway to contract out work.

Since the lockout began, the leaders of USW Local 9700 have insisted that they want to work with management to make ABI more profitable, that they have already agreed to significant rollbacks on pensions and other issues, and would be willing to accept further givebacks when management returns to the bargaining table.

The union's March "counter-offer" proposed the elimination of 103 jobs (10 percent of the workforce); the replacement of the current defined pension-benefit scheme by a defined-contribution scheme where all the financial risk would be borne by the workers; and changes

to work organization to provide greater "flexibility" in the assigning of work and facilitate speed up. However, even these massive concessions have not satisfied ABI's co-owners, the aluminum giants Alcoa and Rio Tinto.

The union is now desperately trying to hide the failure of its strategy. Under conditions where the Parti Québécois—which the union bureaucracy long promoted as a "progressive," even "pro-worker" party—has been discredited because of its imposition of brutal austerity measures and its pronounced shift toward anti-immigrant chauvinism, the Steelworkers are turning to the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire (QS) to provide them with a "left" cover.

Earlier this month, QS MNAs (Members of the National Assembly) Alexandre Leduc and Ruba Ghazal invited USW Local 9700 President Clément Masse, as well as representatives of the USW-affiliated taxi drivers' union, for a press conference at the provincial legislature building. There, Ghazal spoke of the need to "create new bonds of solidarity" between different groups of workers—i.e., between the various pro-capitalist union apparatuses—and presented QS as the party that will "protect working conditions and jobs."

QS extended this invitation to Masse just a couple of weeks after the Steelworkers had invited Leduc to address the May 25 demonstration they organized in support of the ABI workers in Trois-Rivières, the city that lies across the St. Lawrence River from Bécancour.

The Trois-Rivières protest was only the second significant demonstration the Steelworkers have organized since the lockout began, and was clearly aimed at deflecting rank-and-file criticism over their ruinous attempts to court Legault and his big business government.

Coming to the aid of the USW bureaucrats, Leduc claimed that there is "solidarity" with the ABI workers in the Quebec parliament, thus boosting false hopes that the opposition parties—the PQ, the Liberal Party, and QS—will come to the workers' aid.

QS is determined to maintain the domination of the

trade unions over the working class. Yet these pro-capitalist organizations have suppressed the class struggle for decades, imposing concessions and job cuts, and isolating and smothering whatever struggles have broken out. As a nationalist pro-Quebec independence party, QS is adamantly opposed to uniting the growing opposition of workers in Quebec with the struggles of their class brothers and sisters across Canada, in the US and beyond. QS seeks to channel the ABI workers and the entire working class behind the pro-independence wing of the political establishment.

The QS MNAs demagogically talk about uniting workers. But like the USW and QFL leaders, they have never once called on other sections of workers in Quebec and Canada to come to the defense of the ABI workers by organizing solidarity strikes and other militant actions. Nor are they proposing that the ABI workers join with thousands of US Alcoa-Arconic workers in mounting a joint struggle against all concessions and job cuts. The Alcoa-Arconic workers have voted overwhelmingly in favour of strike action, but the USW leaders refuse to sanction any job action.

In an attempt to cover up its own role in isolating and sabotaging the ABI workers' struggle, the USW announced with much fanfare earlier this month that it has filed a complaint against the Quebec government with the International Labour Organization (ILO), a United Nations agency subordinate to the capitalist governments of its member states.

It was the Steelworkers union that insisted Legault could be pressured to come to the workers' aid. But, in what is a self-indictment, its complaint charges that the premier spread misinformation about the lockout to the detriment of the workers. "In this negotiation," says the USW complaint, "it is the employer that is making demands, and that added new demands several months after initiating the lockout. The union has no demands."

Underscoring that its ILO complaint is a hollow gesture that will have no practical consequence for the 1,000 locked out workers, Masse said that it is only intended to "try to change the attitude of our government."

In addition to Legault, the union continues to appeal to Alcoa shareholders and other politicians to convince Alcoa and Rio Tinto that the lockout is a bad business decision, and that they should instead take up the union's offer to partner with them in imposing concessions and boosting corporate "competitiveness."

Another strategy is open to ABI workers: a turn to the international working class. All over the world—from the

Yellow Vest protesters in France, and the Matamoros workers in Mexico, to the US teacher strikes, and the mass protests in Algeria—workers are challenging austerity, the casualization of work, and ever-widening social inequality.

But the unions, which over the past four decades have integrated themselves into management, are utterly opposed to a working-class counter-offensive.

This is the case with the Steelworkers, which continues to isolate the ABI workers and refuses to mount any genuine struggle against Legault's right-wing populist government, even though it is preparing a major offensive against the entire working class. In recent weeks, Legault has denounced the "high" wages and conditions of all workers in Quebec; supported Montreal-based Velan's decision to cut 200 jobs and transfer production to India; and rammed through chauvinist legislation to divide workers and divert attention from his government's austerity program.

The Steelworkers and QFL are adamantly opposed to making the ABI workers' courageous stand against concessions the spearhead of a working class mobilization in Quebec, across Canada and internationally against austerity and job cuts because they fear that such a movement threatens the capitalist system that they defend tooth and nail.

Faced with the efforts of the unions and its political ally Québec Solidaire to sabotage their struggle, ABI workers must form a rank-and-file committee, led by the most militant workers, to seize the leadership of their struggle from the deathly grip of the Steelworkers union, and appeal to workers across North America and Alcoa and Rio Tinto workers around the world for support. A counter-offensive against austerity, concessions, anti-strike laws and war must be driven by a socialist perspective: the struggle to reorganize socioeconomic life in order to satisfy the social needs of all and not to enrich the capitalist class.



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