

Quebec: Alcoa issues ultimatum to locked-out ABI workers

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Alcoa has issued an ultimatum to the thousand workers at the ABI aluminum-smelter in Bécancour, Quebec, it locked out 18 months ago after they rejected its sweeping concession demands.

The Pittsburgh-based transnational has given the workers until Friday, July 5, to surrender to its demand for a six-year concession-laden contract. If they do not, it will halt all operations at the smelter.

Company officials are loudly proclaiming that the closure of the last of the smelter's three potlines would greatly "complicate and prolong" any future resumption of production at ABI.

Alcoa and Rio Tinto-Alcan, its 25 percent partner in the ABI joint-venture, are thus vowing to indefinitely mothball the smelter, and, trying to intimidate the locked-out workers, under conditions of cut-throat global competition in the aluminum industry, with the implicit threat ABI might never reopen.

"We are at a crossroads," declared Alcoa Canada President Jean-François Cyr last Wednesday, after a brief meeting with United Steelworker officials. "This is a final attempt."

The company's "final contract offer" differs only slightly from one the workers overwhelmingly rejected in a secret-ballot vote in March, after fourteen months of lockout.

The defined-benefit pension plan would be shut down and replaced by a defined-contribution plan under which workers shoulder all the financial risk. The only modification from the company's March offer is that Alcoa/ABI now says it will top up the existing pension plan with \$8 million before shutting it down.

Management also continues to insist on the elimination of more than 100 jobs and sweeping changes to work rules and manning requirements, so it can speed-up production and greatly increase output per

worker. According to ABI, these changes would enable it to surpass pre-lockout production levels.

The company is also demanding enhanced "freedom" to contract out work, although it claims that in comparison with its March offer the contracting-out clause in its "final offer" is less favourable to management.

Quebec's right-wing nationalist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government has once again rallied to Alcoa/ABI's support. Even as he claimed not to want to exert "undue pressure" on the workers, Quebec Labour Minister Jean Boulet amplified the company's blackmail threats. "If [management's] offer is refused," said Boulet, "I fear that this dispute could continue for a long time." He then went on to shamelessly lie. Boulet claimed ABI's concessions-filled offer contains "interesting advances" for the workers, and praised the company readiness to "compromise."

Quebec Premier François Legault has repeatedly browbeaten the locked-out ABI workers. In public statements and on Twitter the former Air Transat CEO has denounced the ABI workers for their "too high" wages—although not even Alcoa has proposed wage rollbacks—and for their "excessive" demands—although throughout the conflict all the demands have come from management.

The press is also backing the company's intimidation campaign. The local Trois-Rivières newspaper, *Le Nouvelliste*, published "An Open Letter to the Unionized ABI Workers," authored by Raymond Bachand. Quebec's finance minister in the last years of the Charest Liberal government, Bachand highlighted management's implicit threat to close the smelter if the workers continue to resist its concession demands. "The interests of all Quebec are at stake in the

continuation of ABI's operations," declared Bachand.

In his "open letter," Bachand praised the role of the unions, noting his own close collaboration with the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL) and the United Steelworkers (USW), when he served as the CEO of the QFL's multi-billion dollar venture capital fund, the Solidarity Fund.

The USW has refused to make any public comment on Alcoa's ultimatum, let alone coupled an emphatic call for it to be rejected with an appeal for workers across Quebec, Canada, and internationally to come to the ABI workers' defence.

Such an appeal would win broad support, beginning with the 5,000 workers at Alcoa and Alcoa-owned Arconic plants in the US who have voted to strike against similar concession demands.

Instead, as in March, the union intends to reveal its stance only when workers meet Tuesday to vote on the company's "final offer."

This gives the company and capitalist media free rein to mount their intimidation campaign, while placing workers in the most difficult position to formulate their response.

This act of sabotage is entirely in keeping with the conduct of the Steelworkers' Quebec, Canadian, and Pittsburgh-based International leaderships and of the leadership of USW Local 9700 since the ABI workers were locked out on January 9, 2018.

The USW has systematically isolated the ABI workers' courageous anti-concessions struggle, leaving the ABI workers to fight the aluminum giants Alcoa and Rio Tinto alone.

The union has repeatedly proclaimed its willingness to make major concessions, including accepting the phasing out of the existing defined-benefit pension plan and job cuts.

Utterly opposed to making the ABI workers' struggle the spearhead of a broader working-class counter-offensive against all concessions, job cuts and capitalist austerity, the USW and QFL have sought at every point to divert the locked-out workers' energies into futile and reactionary appeals to Alcoa shareholders and Quebec's big business politicians and government.

For months, the Steelworkers claimed that Legault and his CAQ could be prevailed on to intervene on the workers' behalf, although the CAQ is notorious for its support for privatization, austerity and corporate tax

cuts. Invariably when Legault did intervene, it was to support Alcoa in its concessions drive.

This debacle, however, has caused not the slightest change in the union's strategy, as exemplified by the Steelworkers' manifest refusal to link the ABI workers' struggle with that of the Alcoa and Arconic workers.

The press is claiming that the USW will call for rejection of Alcoa's provocative concessions-filled "final offer" at today's Local 9700 membership meeting. Even if this proves true, the ABI workers must immediately take action to seize the leadership of their struggle from the hands of the pro-capitalist union apparatus.

Defenders of the subordination of workers' rights to big business profit and opponents of any challenge to management's "right" to shut down production in factories and mills at will, the USW will mount no struggle against Alcoa/ABI should it act on its threat to mothball or permanently close the Bécancour smelter .

The ABI workers should form a rank-and-file action committee so as to break through the straitjacket the USW has erected around their struggle, join forces with the US Alcoa-Arconic workers and other workers in Canada and around the world in a common fight against the aluminum bosses, and fight for the development of a working-class counter-offensive against the assault of big business and their accomplices in the political establishment on workers' rights and jobs.



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