

18-month lockout at aluminum plant ends

Quebec ABI workers' struggle betrayed by United Steelworkers Union

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After more than 18 months of resistance to the efforts of management at the Alcoa/Rio Tinto-owned Aluminerie de Bécancour (ABI) aluminum smelting plant in Bécancour, Quebec, to impose major concessions, employees last week accepted the employer's final offer by a margin of 80 percent. This ends one of the longest labour disputes in the private sector in Quebec.

The defeat, which will be used to lower working conditions throughout the industry, is the result of the systematic isolation of ABI workers' courageous struggle by the leadership of the United Steelworkers (USW) union.

In the final act of its betrayal, the USW refused to take a public stand on management's ultimatum, waiting until the last minute at the meeting to recommend a rejection of the offer. This gave the company and the capitalist media a free hand to intensify their campaign of intimidation against the workers.

The union's sole justification for recommending a rejection was that the agreement had not been "negotiated" and that the company had thus bypassed the services of the union bureaucracy to impose the concessions.

In fact, the union had repeatedly stated that it was prepared to make significant concessions, including accepting job losses and the phasing out of the defined benefit pension plan.

Although few details have been made public, it is clear that the three contracts signed contain significant concessions for workers. The "final contract offer," presented alongside the threat of the plant's closure if it were rejected, differs only slightly from the one that

workers overwhelmingly rejected last March.

A defined benefit pension plan will be replaced by a defined contribution plan, under which workers will assume all financial risks. The only change from the March offer is that the company will add \$8 million to the existing pension plan before terminating it.

Management claims to have withdrawn its request to cut more than 100 jobs. However, since the lockout began, 130 workers have retired, many early, and these jobs will not be replaced. Therefore, the 1030 employees at the beginning of the lockout have been reduced to just 900.

ABI, co-owned by multinational aluminum giants Alcoa (75 percent) and Rio Tinto Alcan (25 percent), has also succeeded in imposing major changes to work rules in order to accelerate production at the expense of working conditions.

The company claims that the subcontracting clause in its "final offer" is less advantageous for it than in the March offer, but it will still have greater "freedom" to subcontract in various sectors of the plant's activity. ABI has also been successful in reducing the number of annual hours granted for union leave.

To sweeten the pill, the company cancelled a \$19 million lawsuit it had filed in the first few months of the lockout on the grounds that the union had used "illegal" pressure tactics that caused production slowdowns. It has slightly relaxed its return-to-work protocol compared to the March protocol, which did not offer any official return date or guaranteed hours for workers. According to the union, the new 10-month protocol will still ensure that "many employees will remain without work, and therefore without pay and insurance, for several months to come."

The ruling class welcomed the acceptance of the agreement with enthusiasm. On Twitter, Quebec Premier François Legault, who intervened in full support of the company during the conflict by denouncing the “excessive” salaries of ABI employees, described the outcome of the vote as “excellent news.”

After the announcement of the end of the lockout and the conclusion of a contract filled with concessions for workers, Alcoa’s shares increased by 1.5 percent to US\$23.26 on the New York Stock Exchange.

Throughout the conflict, the USW, USW Local 9700 and their allies in the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL) made no appeal to their hundreds of thousands of members across the province and to workers in Canada and abroad to stand up for ABI workers. They did not seek to mobilize Alcoa workers in Australia and Spain who were at the same time fighting the company’s offensive on jobs and wages, nor to link the struggle at ABI to that of the 5,000 workers at Alcoa and Arconic’s (an Alcoa subsidiary) plants in the United States who voted in favour of a strike against similar concession demands.

During the ABI lockout, the Steelworkers paved the way for further givebacks for Rio Tinto workers in Alma, the location of another plant in Quebec, by agreeing to reopen the collective agreement while it was still in effect.

Only a few weeks ago, the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN), which represents Alcoa’s workers at the Baie-Comeau plant, signed a concession contract, thereby isolating the ABI workers and allowing the company to maintain the hard line in Bécancour.

USW leaders have led workers to believe that the company could back down on its demands if workers put enough pressure on the company’s shareholders and political representatives. They lied when they said that the right-wing government of the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) and its Prime Minister, former Air Transat CEO Legault, would come to their aid.

Even after Legault intervened in support of the company, while denouncing wages in Quebec’s industrial sector as “too high,” the union continued to court Legault while refusing to mobilize the working class against the employer and government assault on jobs, pensions, and social programs.

The USW received crucial support from Québec

Solidaire (QS), which gave it “left-wing” cover, particularly after the bankruptcy of its strategy to appeal to Legault was exposed. Seeking to cover up the treacherous role of the union leadership, QS MP Alexandre Leduc refused to call the final agreement a defeat for the workers and simply stated that they were emerging from the conflict “with an agreement containing fewer concessions than the one previously proposed by the employer.”

The main lesson to be learned from the conflict at ABI is the need for workers to break from the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracy. Rand-and-file committees must be built to mobilize the entire social force of the working class in a unified counter-offensive in defence of jobs, pensions, and public services. Such a struggle must be driven by a socialist perspective: the complete reorganization of the economy in order to satisfy social needs, not the profits of a tiny minority.



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