

Canada's pseudo-left Fightback group covers for Steelworkers' betrayal of ABI workers

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Despite workers' determination to defend their working conditions and benefits, the 18-month lockout at the Alcoa-Rio Tinto co-owned ABI aluminum smelter in Bécancour, Quebec, ended in July with the signing of a concessions-filled collective agreement and the elimination of more than 100 jobs or 10 percent of the workforce.

In an article on the lessons of the ABI dispute, the *World Socialist Web Site* explained that this defeat was "the result of the systematic isolation of the struggle by the United Steelworkers (USW) and Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL) leaderships." In an assessment of this experience, we identified two essential tasks for the working class as a whole.

1) The adoption of an international strategy:

"While Alcoa and Rio Tinto locked out their Bécancour employees," we noted, "they demanded concessions from their employees in Australia and the United States and announced plant closures and job losses in Spain." This was part of an "international offensive by big business to make workers pay for the crisis of the capitalist profit system."

We insisted that to defeat the attacks mounted by the globally-organized transnational corporations, workers must mount "a unified and coordinated response on a global scale," uniting their struggles across state boundaries and continents. This requires "a break with the nationalist, pro-capitalist policy of the trade unions, which in the name of ensuring the competitiveness of our 'own' industries, are imposing the dictates of the bosses."

2) The launching of an independent political struggle:

Quebec Premier François Legault, head of the far-right Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ), openly intervened in the ABI dispute, denouncing the workers' "excessive" demands, as well as the "too high" wages in Quebec's manufacturing sector as a whole. This, we explained, underscored that the government was serving as the spearhead of big business' "frontal assault on the entire working class."

Legault's intervention exposed the bankruptcy of the unions, which for months had campaigned for him to involve himself in the ABI dispute, portraying this multi-millionaire, ex-CEO converted into a right-wing politician as an ally of the workers. At the same time, the USW bureaucracy vehemently opposed making any call for action in support of the ABI workers from the union's more than 800,000 members or from other workers in Canada, the United States and overseas who are confronting the same capitalist offensive.

In contrast to the nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective of the Steelworkers and QFL, we insisted that "ABI workers were engaged, not just in a trade union dispute over a collective agreement, but in a political struggle against the entire class-war program of the ruling elite."

Fightback shills for the USW

It is instructive to compare this program of struggle, based on a socialist-internationalist perspective, to that produced by Fightback (La Riposte in French), a group active within Québec Solidaire and affiliated with the misnamed International Marxist Tendency (IMT).

In an article entitled "Lessons from the lockout at ABI," Fightback tries to conceal the treacherous role that the USW and the QFL played in isolating and demoralizing ABI workers—the latest betrayal in the unions' decades-long suppression of worker resistance to wage, job and benefit cuts and the dismantling of public services.

Fightback, in the second paragraph of its "Lessons" article, notes approvingly that Clément Masse, the president of Steelworkers ABI local, USW 9700, "recommended rejecting this new offer that had not been negotiated."

This is a deliberate sleight of hand. Everyone who followed the conclusion of the dispute knows full well that Masse and the USW bureaucracy intentionally delayed issuing a recommendation on ABI's "final contract offer," leaving workers alone in the face of a barrage of propaganda, including the threat of a total shutdown of ABI's operations, from the media, company management, and the political elite. Then, at the last minute, the USW sought to save face by posing as an opponent of the deal, confident that its isolation tactics had worn down workers' resistance.

Aside from this false presentation of what happened in the final days of the lockout, Fightback whitewashes the role Masse and the entire USW and QFL apparatuses played in the systematic isolation of the ABI's workers struggle.

Nor does it explain that the "negotiated" offer demanded by Masse would not have been essentially different from the company's "final offer" ultimatum: from the very beginning of the conflict in January 2018, the union repeatedly proclaimed its willingness to make significant concessions, including accepting the elimination of the defined pension benefit plan and job cuts. Its only condition was that the company use the USW's services in imposing these concessions on the ABI workers.

Fightback also gives prominence to a long quotation from Masse which blames the defeat on the "social pressure" exerted by the political establishment and "the fact that this conflict was unequal, with workers confronting a deep-pocketed employer."

Far from denouncing the union's slander that workers cannot, or will not, fight against big business and its political representatives, Fightback openly endorses it by writing that the "general feeling that emerges from this conflict is that it was a particularly unequal fight."

If there was anything unequal about the ABI struggle, it was that while the bosses had the government, major parties, big business, and the USW on their side, no organization, outside of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), intervened with a program that provided workers with a means to fight.

Disarming the working class in the face of capitalist state repression

Fightback goes on to say that “François Legault’s shameless support for the giants Alcoa and Rio Tinto has further isolated the workers,” without any criticism or mention of the fact that it was the unions that paved the way for Legault’s attack by repeatedly imploring him to intervene in the dispute. While covering the tracks of the USW and QFL, Fightback praises the “Quebec labour movement,” calling it “perhaps the most powerful in North America with ... immense resources.”

The irony of their position seems to have escaped the authors. Why weren’t the “immense resources” of the QFL and the Steelworkers used to break the isolation of ABI workers? Why was no appeal made to the millions of workers in North America and around the world who are facing the same employer attacks on their wages, jobs and social rights to join an international working-class counteroffensive against the transnationals and their hirelings in government?

The answer to these questions is that the trade unions, historically based on the acceptance of the profit system and the defence of national industry, have undergone a profound transformation in recent decades. They have been integrated into corporate management and the capitalist state, becoming an industrial police force dedicated to imposing the diktats of big business.

This is why the resurgence of workers’ and social struggles that has taken place on an international scale since 2018 has developed outside of and in ever more open rebellion against the pro-capitalist trade union apparatuses. The WSWS and SEP welcome this movement and seek to give it a conscious form by encouraging the formation of rank-and-file committees independent of the trade unions and oriented towards the international upsurge of the class struggle and the independent political mobilization of workers against the entire capitalist order.

In contrast, the role of groups like Fightback, which speak for privileged sections of the middle classes that orbit around the trade union bureaucracy, is to whitewash the unions’ betrayals and provide them with “left” credentials. This is nothing but a desperate attempt to keep the working class under the control of these increasingly discredited pro-capitalist organizations.

Far from criticizing the union’s strategy of appealing to Legault, which led ABI workers into a dead end, Fightback’s article positively celebrates it. The authors merely complain that “the union federations” did “not put in place a plan to escalate pressure tactics.”

Empty radical-sounding phrases like “the mobilization of broad layers of the working class in support of ABI” serve to camouflage the same miserable policy pursued by the USW, i.e., pressure on Legault and his far-right CAQ government. “A one-day solidarity strike involving other sectors of the Quebec working class,” the article states, “may have forced Couillard [Legault’s predecessor] or Legault to intervene... to encourage the employer to make certain concessions.”

What planet do these petty-bourgeois scoundrels think they are living on? Under conditions in which the Canadian bourgeoisie has shown dozens of times over the past few decades its determination to crush working class resistance with the full force of the capitalist state, including by imposing back-to-work legislation, arresting strikers, and allowing the police to run rampant at demonstrations, are workers really to believe that a one-day protest strike under the control of the right-wing union bureaucracy would make it change course? This scandalous light-mindedness is made all the more criminal by the fact that Fightback wrote these lines as the right-wing populist Doug Ford, who has denounced opponents of his austerity agenda as “violent” and “extremist,” is preparing in the neighbouring province of Ontario to criminalize strikes by close to 200,000 teachers.

As the bourgeoisie turns to authoritarian methods of rule to confront

mounting working class struggle, and the unions line up squarely on the side of the capitalists, Fightback, with its appeal for a “one-day” strike to “pressure” Legault to “encourage” the company to make “certain” concessions, advocates workers hold out a begging bowl.

Fightback promotes Quebec nationalism

Fightback’s miserable apologetics for the union bureaucracy goes hand in hand with its deeply nationalist perspective, which is reflected in its suggestion that Steelworkers should have sought support from “other sectors of the Quebec working class.” No mention is ever made of workers in the rest of Canada and North America, let alone Alcoa and Rio Tinto employees in Australia, Spain or elsewhere in the world.

Fightback writes at the end of its article that “nationalization under democratic control is the only way to protect our jobs” and adds that “such a perspective is not at all foreign to the Quebec labour movement.” To support this thesis, reference is made to a manifesto adopted by the QFL in 1971 entitled “L’État, rouage de notre exploitation” (The state is our exploiter).

If the Quebec labour federations had to adopt a “radical” or even “anti-capitalist” pose at the beginning of the 1970s, it was to better control and tame a militant upsurge of the Quebec working class, which was part of, and fueled by, an international revolutionary working class offensive that rocked the world between 1968 and 1975.

Central to the union bureaucracy’s strategy was the promotion of Quebec nationalism and separatism to isolate Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada and North America, and to politically subordinate them to the newly-created big business party, the Parti Québécois (PQ).

At the very point when the Quebec unions’ left-wing nationalist posturing was at its height, the framework within which such reactionary programs could at least seem temporarily plausible was breaking down. With the collapse of the post-Second World War boom, the bourgeoisie turned to right-wing austerity policies, and with the globalization of production in the 1980s, all nationally-based parties and organizations moved sharply to the right and came into open conflict with the working class.

The Quebec unions thus paved the way for the subsequent decades of savage capitalist austerity and emergency anti-strike laws implemented by a succession of PQ and Liberal governments provincially, and Liberal and Conservative governments federally.

Fightback’s call for “nationalization under democratic control” has nothing to do with the independent political mobilization of workers in the struggle for a workers’ government based on a socialist program. It is rather a ploy to keep workers subordinated to the unions. In the context of Fightback’s activity within Québec Solidaire, it is a disguised and politically dishonest way to revive Quebec nationalism and promote Quebec’s independence—the formation of a third imperialist state in North America.

It is this reactionary program—discredited in the eyes of workers by decades of budget cuts imposed by the PQ when it was in power and by its shift over the past decades to a more extreme form of Quebec chauvinism—that Québec Solidaire is now seeking to revive. In this reactionary endeavour, they enjoy the crucial support of pseudo-left groups like Fightback.



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