

More than 1,500 food processing workers strike two Quebec plants

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The six hundred workers at the Exceldor chicken processing plant in Saint-Anselme, a town fifty kilometers south of Quebec City, have been on strike since May 23.

The workers, who have been without a contract since last July, rejected an offer from Exceldor by 88 percent at the beginning of May. At the same time, they voted 95 percent in favor of strike action. On May 23, they rejected a second company offer by 78 percent, and the strike started at 2pm the same day.

According to Exceldor, its last offer contained an 18 percent wage increase over six years, as opposed to the 40 percent wage increase over six years that it claims Local 1991-P of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) is seeking.

One worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the workers' demands concern not just wages, but also working conditions, including vacations and group insurance. He also reported that the union did not take a position on Exceldor's two contract offers, adding that workers have been kept in the dark about the progress of negotiations throughout.

Exceldor, which portrays itself as a "homegrown" farmer-owned "coop," is one of Canada's largest poultry processors. Following a merger with Granny's in 2019, Exceldor employs close to 3,500 people in facilities in Quebec, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Ontario. The company generates approximately \$1 billion in sales annually.

Like the rest of the food processing industry, Exceldor has prioritized profits over human lives during the COVID-19 pandemic, keeping its employees working in unsafe plants. This has resulted in outbreaks in Saint-Anselme in November 2020 (at least 8 reported cases) and Saint-Bruno-de-Montarville, Quebec in April 2020 (at least 23 reported cases). At its Blumenort, Manitoba slaughterhouse, the largest of its kind in that province with 650 employees, at least 52 employees have

contracted the virus and 2 have died.

With each outbreak, Exceldor, with the complicity of public health authorities and the unions, launched phony "mass testing" campaigns to keep its plants open and blamed the workers themselves by claiming, without proof, that the outbreaks were the result of "community transmission," i.e., that the infected workers had contracted the virus outside the plant.

In Vallée-Jonction in Quebec's Beauce region, less than 40 km from the Exceldor plant, 1,100 workers at an Olymel hog slaughtering and processing plant are continuing the strike they launched more than six weeks ago on April 28.

The workers are demanding a wage catch-up after two rotten agreements negotiated in 2007 and 2015 by the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU)-affiliated Olymel Vallée-Jonction Workers Union (STOVJ) resulted in real-terms wage cuts of 40 percent.

At a May 15 bargaining session overseen by a Quebec government-appointed conciliator, Olymel presented a contract offer that the union said contained "appalling setbacks." The company, which made \$234 million in profits in 2020, claims it cannot offer more if it wants to remain "competitive."

In response, the STOVJ has sought to sow illusions among workers that they can advance their interests by pleading with the company and the right-wing Quebec government of François Legault, a multi-millionaire former CEO who routinely speaks out in favour of management in labor disputes. In fact, on May 18, Quebec's CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec) government gave Olymel \$150 million in the form of an "investment," without demanding anything in return regarding workers' conditions.

On May 21, the union organized a demonstration in the streets of Vallée-Jonction in which about 250 workers

took part. The route taken by the striking workers took them past the homes of some of the plant's executives. On this occasion, STOVJ President Martin Maurice summed up the union's tactics by declaring: "We want to have the respect of the employer and that's why we're here. We want them to listen to us."

Such appeals are futile. The ruling class is intent on making the working class pay for the hundreds of billions of dollars that the state funneled to the banks, big business and wealthy investors under the guise of "bailouts" at the beginning of the pandemic. The struggle of the Olymel and Exceldor workers is taking place in the context of a global big business assault on jobs, wages and working conditions.

The ruling class and its political lackeys stand fully behind Olymel and Exceldor. They are aware that in the midst of an upsurge in the class struggle across Canada and internationally a seemingly local and limited conflict could help trigger a social explosion. So, they use the pro-capitalist unions to handcuff the workers and contain their struggle within the framework of pro-employer labor laws and a sham "collective bargaining" process.

To intensify pressure on the workers, the big business media have produced a slew of reports blaming them for the adverse "consequences" of the food processing strikes. There have been numerous articles, for example, that deplore a possible shortage of chickens in Quebec's newly reopened restaurants and the apparent need to euthanize thousands of chickens that currently can't be slaughtered at the strike-bound Saint-Anselme plant. This set the stage for Exceldor's executives to demand the Quebec government adopt an "emergency law" criminalizing the strike and ordering the workers to immediately return to work.

With the full-throated support of Legault and Quebec big business, the federal Liberal government recently passed back-to-work legislation to break the Port of Montreal dockers' strike, and the CAQ government has threatened to similarly outlaw job action by the province's construction and public sector workers, whose collective agreements have expired.

To secure their just demands and prevail in the face of the threat that the CAQ government will intervene to criminalize their strikes, the Olymel and Exceldor workers must join forces and broaden their struggle. This is a necessity of which they are increasingly aware. On June 2, striking Olymel workers visited Exceldor workers on their picket lines, in an act of solidarity that one worker described as a "surprise visit."

The STOVJ and UFCW, and the labour federations with which they are respectively affiliated, the CNTU and Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL), have done next to nothing to publicize this elementary act of class solidarity. This is because, even if limited, the joint action constituted a challenge to their decades-long efforts to isolate and undermine worker struggles, while pursuing "social dialogue" with big business and state.

The STOVJ only briefly mentioned the event on its Facebook page. Yet on the same day, June 2, the STOVJ and the CNTU organized a well-publicized demonstration of Olymel workers in Quebec City. Its purpose was not to mobilize the independent and unified force of workers against the big business assault on wages, jobs and working conditions. Rather, it was aimed at politically lulling workers into submission, with empty pleas to the Legault government that it step back from its plan to push through legislation (Bill 59) in the coming days that undermines occupational health and safety.

In opposition to the strategy of demobilization and division put forward by the pro-capitalist unions and so as to take their struggle into their own hands, Quebec's striking food processing workers must build rank-and-file committees at their respective plants.

Such fighting bodies must be entirely independent of the trade union apparatuses and the big business political parties. They will allow strikers at Olymel and Exceldor to make contact with their brothers and sisters across North America where there is a rise in militant struggles, including among the miners at Vale in Sudbury, Ontario, and Volvo workers in Dublin, Virginia. This will facilitate the exchange of information, organization of solidarity actions, and the development of a working class counter-offensive against all concessions, speed-up, the dismantling of public services, and the criminalization of working class struggles.



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