

Quebec establishment demands end to strike by food processing workers, invoking plight of chickens-for-slaughter

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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. They have rejected two derisory employer offers, and are demanding improvements to their wages, and vacation and group insurance benefits.

Exceldor is an agri-food giant with revenues of more than one billion Canadian dollars a year and plants in four Canadian provinces.

When in normal operation, nearly one million chickens are processed at the Saint-Anselme plant each week. Since Exceldor made no arrangements for what would happen to its chicken supply in the event of a strike, a portion of these chickens must now be euthanized because they can't be processed elsewhere.

From the start of the strike, Exceldor has raised the spectre of a massive loss of chickens to demand that Quebec's right-wing CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec) government intervene to criminalize the strike or declare the plant an "essential service" so as to force the employees back to work.

Last Wednesday's announcement that one million chickens have been euthanized since the strike began was the cue for Quebec's political establishment and corporate media to go into a frenzy. They are intent on exploiting this issue as the pretext for forcing an end to the strike.

Quebec Agriculture Minister André Lamontagne demanded the union that represents the Exceldor workers, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), agree to the CAQ's proposal that the contract dispute be sent to binding arbitration. Noting that management had immediately agreed to the government's arbitration request, Lamontagne claimed UFCW negotiators have a "moral responsibility" to put an end to the "waste" by immediately ending the strike. While not closing the door to ultimately agreeing to arbitration, the union said that it wanted to give the ongoing mediation process a chance. But no agreement was reached in talks with the company last Thursday and

Friday.

Mandatory arbitration is a pro-employer mechanism in which a government-appointed arbitrator dictates workers' "collective agreement." During such a process, the parties involved must give up all pressure tactics, depriving workers of their legal right to strike or to mount any job action whatsoever.

Faced with the UFCW's initial refusal, Quebec Premier François Legault took to social media to publicly threaten the workers. Legault called the situation "indecent" and said that the strike "should not be allowed to foolishly waste huge amounts of food." After a perfunctory reference to the workers' "right to strike" (accompanied by a reference to the employers' "right to lock out" for good measure), he demanded that the union submit the Exceldor contract dispute to arbitration.

The Quebec premier's anti-worker diatribe was soon echoed by the federal Liberal government's agriculture minister. Calling the situation "intolerable," Marie-Claude Bibeau likewise demanded the union call off the strike and submit to arbitration.

Legault's and Lamontagne's comments are a frontal attack on the basic rights of Exceldor, and indeed all workers, to strike and bargain collectively. A multi-millionaire and former Air Transat CEO, Quebec's premier is well known for this type of public intervention against striking workers. During an 18-month lockout in 2018-2019, Legault viciously attacked striking workers at the ABI aluminum smelter in Bécancour, Quebec. He denounced their "high wages" and openly sided with Rio Tinto and Alcoa, the two global mining giants that jointly own ABI. In March and April of this year, Legault and his government mounted a weeks-long campaign urging the federal government to criminalize an impending strike by the 1,150 dockers at the Port of Montreal, and applauded enthusiastically when Justin Trudeau's Liberal government adopted a back-to-work law as soon as the dockers launched

an unlimited strike. In recent weeks, the CAQ government has also threatened to use strikebreaking legislation against Quebec's public sector and construction workers, whose collective agreements have expired.

Legault's intervention against the Exceldor workers prompted a flurry of articles and opinion pieces by leading media commentators, from Antoine Robitaille of the *Journal de Montréal* to Isabelle Hachey of *La Presse*. With hysterical evocations of "millions of wasted meals" and melodramatic pleas about the purported plight of chickens "euthanized" because they could not be slaughtered for human consumption, these articles all adopt, more or less explicitly, Exceldor's demand that the CAQ government force the workers back to work.

In an attempt to cover up their hostility to the working class, the big business columnists included hypocritical demands that workers' rights be respected at the same time. But it is clear that these two demands are irreconcilable. As Hachey put it, "He [Legault] must stop the bleeding and force the unionized workers back to work, while urging both sides to negotiate." Since a forced return-to-work would deprive workers of all leverage, the company would be able to virtually dictate its terms. All the more so, as it would be able to threaten the workers with a contract imposed by a government-appointed arbitrator if a "negotiated settlement" were not reached.

The most remarkable element of the cynical bourgeois morality campaign over the fate of Quebec's chickens is the total absence of any reference to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on workers, particularly those in the food industry, who rank among those most affected by the coronavirus crisis.

The politicians, led by Legault, who are now in a tizzy over the fate of Exceldor's chickens are the same ones who have put big-business profit before human lives, refused to take the science-based measures that could have halted the spread of the virus, and consequently are directly responsible for the deaths of over 11,000 Quebecers. The ruling class is so impervious to the concerns and needs of working people that its political representatives feel no shame in focusing exclusively on the fate of chickens bred for slaughter, without paying so much as lip service to the safety and lives of workers.

Similarly, none of the richly paid columnists who have devoted thousands of words to detailing the euthanasia of chickens and begging for "mercy" on their behalf have anything to say about the tragic fate of the 26,000 Canadians who have died from COVID-19, let alone the courage to point the finger of responsibility at the ruling elites.

Where were Robitaille's pleas for mercy when Olymel, Cargill and Exceldor workers were being infected by the

dozens in unsafe plants that were kept open simply to continue to pile up profits? What did Hachey demand of governments when workers at Exceldor in Manitoba, Cargill in Alberta and Olymel in Quebec died of the coronavirus?

Their denunciation of "food waste" is equally laughable. According to the United Nations, Canada is among the countries in the world with the highest per capita food waste—millions of tons each year. A 2019 study concluded that 55 percent of this waste occurs during production, distribution, packaging and processing.

This "normal" waste, however, is viewed as the cost of doing business by companies such as Exceldor, and it does not agitate anyone in ruling circles since it has no impact on profits. On the other hand, the euthanasia of the chickens destined for the Saint-Anselme plant provokes rage within the ruling class because it is unforeseen and therefore negatively affects profit margins.

The underlying cause of the hysterical reaction by the ruling class to the strike at Exceldor is the same as that which has led it to resort with ever-greater frequency to emergency laws criminalizing strikes and social opposition. It lives in constant fear of a broader working class counteroffensive against the big business assault on jobs, wages, and public services, and indifference to human life. Such a counter-offensive, which would meet with mass support among food processing workers and millions in other economic sectors across Canada and internationally, can only be led by the working class, organized independently on the basis of a socialist program to fight for its own class demands.

For the Exceldor workers, the first practical step in this struggle must be the creation of a rank-and-file strike committee to take control of their struggle out of the hands of the pro-employer UFCW, which has overseen one round of concessions after another in recent decades, and has been complicit in the ruling class' savage disregard for workers' lives during the pandemic.



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