

900 workers at Rio Tinto's British Columbia smelter strike over contract labour and pension rights

Roger Jordan
26 July 2021

Around 900 workers walked off the job at mining conglomerate Rio Tinto's aluminium smelting facility in Kitimat and power plant in Kemano, British Columbia early Sunday morning. The workers, for whom Unifor Local 2301 is the bargaining agent, are striking against the highly profitable company's ever-expanding use of temporary contract labour and its refusal to grant workers hired since 2019 defined-benefit pensions.

Talks between the Australia-based multinational, which is the third-largest mining corporation in the world, and union representatives began on June 7. Management immediately made clear its determination to enforce aggressive cost-cutting measures, even though the company raked in net profits of US \$9.8 billion in 2020.

Workers, for their part, have indicated they are determined to overturn a series of union-endorsed concessions imposed in previous contracts and to defend job protections and pension rights. They are also determined to put an end to the employer's drive to gut working conditions by systematically violating the contract—a practice that has led to some 300 outstanding worker grievances. For the first time ever, the rank-and-file voted 100 percent in favour of taking strike action, when a vote was held earlier this month.

Rio Tinto management responded with further provocations. Even prior to the strike vote, it applied to British Columbia's pro-employer labour relations board to get some of the workers designated "essential employees" so as to ensure it could keep the Kemano power plant and part of its smelting operations running during any work stoppage. Rio Tinto has successfully appealed for such designations during previous contract negotiations, citing the fact that some of the power plant's output is sold to BC Hydro. But this time it petitioned for an even larger number of workers to be deemed essential, including some potline smelter workers.

The labour relations board approved the request, enabling the company to operate both facilities at a reduced level. On Monday, the company said it intends to maintain production at 35 percent of normal capacity. Its aim is to return to full production as soon as possible, whether immediately following the end of the strike or by prevailing on scabs to cross picket lines.

The strike at the Rio Tinto facility in northwestern B.C., which has been Kitimat's main employer since the town was founded by Alcan over six decades ago, is part of a growing upsurge of struggles involving miners, steelworkers, and other industrial workers in Canada, the United States, and internationally.

On the other side of the country in Sudbury, Ontario, some 2,450 miners at Brazilian-based mining multinational Vale are approaching

the end of their second month on the picket lines. Having been forced to work throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Vale miners are resisting the company's attempt to impose wage increases below the inflation-rate—a real terms wage cut—and other concessions, including ending defined-benefit pensions and securing greater leeway to contract out work to low-wage suppliers.

At Warrior Met Coal, in Alabama, more than a thousand miners have been striking for four months against poverty wages, a grueling work regimen and a government-backed scabbing operation.

Over 1,100 steelworkers at Allegheny Technologies in Pennsylvania and several other US states waged a three-month strike earlier this year against attacks on workplace rights and pensions. And at Volvo Trucks' New River Valley plant in Dublin, Virginia, 3,000 autoworkers rebelled three times between April and July against the combined efforts of Volvo management and the United Auto Workers (UAW) union to enforce a concessions-laden contract that included real-terms pay cuts, increases to health care premiums, and attacks on retirees.

The central problem facing all of these struggles—the Rio Tinto strike included—is the determined efforts of the corporatist trade unions to isolate and strangle them. This includes demobilizing workers in the face of company scabbing operations and conspiring with management to impose their demands so as to ensure that their operations remain "globally competitive," i.e., are producing maximum returns for investors. At Vale in Sudbury, workers decisively repudiated a concessions-filled tentative agreement that had been unanimously recommended by the United Steelworkers (USW) Local 6500 leadership.

Like their counterparts in Sudbury and in the United States, the Kitimat workers are waging a struggle against a vast, globally organized corporation that shifts production at will in pursuit of higher profit margins and is determined to ratchet up worker exploitation to further hike shareholder dividends. To prevail in their struggle, the Kitimat Rio Tinto workers must counter the company's global reach and strategy, by fighting to make their strike the spearhead of a working class counter offensive against all concessions, job cuts and speed-up. As a first step, they should make an immediate appeal to striking Vale workers to unify their strikes into a common fight and direct a special call for solidarity from Rio Tinto workers around the world to bring the operations of the mining conglomerate to a grinding halt until workers' demands are met.

Unifor is doing everything in its power to constrain the strike within the straitjacket of the state-designed, pro-employer collective

bargaining system. As soon as the strike got under way, Unifor President Jerry Dias issued a blustering statement complaining about the “greed” and intransigence of Rio Tinto. However, the union has proposed no strategy to the workers for winning the strike.

No appeals have been made to Rio Tinto’s large workforce at its locations across Canada. These include thousands of workers at a refinery and several smelters in Quebec’s Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region, where almost half of the company’s global aluminium production is sited; at the Lac-Tio open titanium dioxide mine near Havre-Saint-Pierre, Quebec; metallurgical facilities in Sorel, Quebec; the Diavik diamond mining complex in the Northwest Territories, where over 1,100 workers are employed; and at the Iron Ore Company of Canada facilities in Labrador City, Newfoundland and Labrador and Sept-Iles, Quebec, which employ over 2,600 workers. Nor has any action been taken to appeal to, let alone mobilize, the thousands of Rio Tinto employees in dozens of countries around the world, who confront equally brutal company attacks on their wages and rights.

In fact, many of the attacks against which the workers are now striking were imposed with Unifor’s full support in previous contract rounds. Rio Tinto concluded a “modernization” of its Kitimat facilities in 2015 aimed at positioning the smelter to export aluminium throughout the Pacific Rim. The \$4.8 billion project, which the union emphatically endorsed as a “job creator,” cut the smelter’s workforce from 1,200 when the “modernization” began to 1,000 employees thereafter. This is just half of the 2,000 employees who worked at Rio Tinto’s Kitimat facilities at their peak during the 1970s.

The “modernization” project was endorsed by the provincial government, which allowed Rio Tinto to blatantly violate environmental regulations, above all by polluting the local area with sulphur dioxide.

In 2017, following an overwhelming vote for strike action, Unifor concluded an 11th-hour deal with Rio Tinto to avert a walkout that contained the closure of the defined-benefit pension plan to all new hires from January 2020 onwards. Dias enthused that he was “proud” of the deal, which was unanimously recommended for ratification by the Unifor Local 2301 bargaining committee.

Workers at the ABI aluminium smelter in Becancour, Quebec, which is co-owned by Rio Tinto and Alcoa, were forced to accept sweeping concessions following an 18-month lockout in July 2019. These included an expansion of the use of sub-contractors, the gutting of pension rights, and the cutting of jobs. The imposition of these concessions was facilitated by the USW, which isolated the locked-out workers and connived behind the scenes with the right-wing provincial government and plant management to force workers into accepting the concessions.

Since its founding in 2013, Unifor, continuing where its predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), left off, has worked hand-in-glove with the corporate bosses and successive governments to ensure that Canada’s auto, aerospace, other manufacturing, mining and aviation industries remain “competitive.” In the name of saving “Canadian jobs,” the union has imposed massive concessions, including the widespread elimination of defined-benefit pensions, multi-tier wages and benefits, and wage cuts. Last fall, Dias, just days after imposing a “pattern agreement” at the Detroit Three automakers that further entrenched multi-tier wages and greenlighted the expanded use of even lower-paid temporary part-time (TPT) workers, appeared at a press conference alongside the bosses of Ford Canada, Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and Ontario Tory Premier Doug Ford and boasted, “We’re all rowing in the same direction.”

The unions’ systematic suppression of the class struggle in the face of a decades-long big business offensive underlines that the problem is not the presence of a few ineffectual or corrupt leaders within Unifor or any other union. Rather, the support extended by the trade unions to contracting out, attacks on pensions, and the scrapping of workplace rules flows inexorably from their pro-capitalist and nationalist politics. The priority of these organizations, which represent the interests of the privileged, middle class bureaucrats who staff them, is to deepen their corporatist relations with company management and the federal and provincial governments by demonstrating their usefulness to the ruling class in imposing attacks on the workers they claim to represent.

If the striking Kitimat Rio Tinto workers are to secure their just demands, it is imperative that they take the struggle into their own hands. A rank-and-file strike committee must be immediately established, organizationally independent of and in political opposition to the pro-capitalist Unifor apparatus, to mobilize support for the strikers in the local community, and among Rio Tinto’s thousands of employees across Canada and internationally. Special appeals must also be issued to the striking Vale miners in Sudbury and striking workers throughout the United States to join a common fight against the savage concessions dictated by the corporate elite.

The rank-and-file committee should raise demands that start from what the strikers actually need, not what the company and Unifor claim is “affordable” to maintain “competitive” operations. This means defined-benefit pensions for all workers, the hiring of all temporary workers as full-time employees with equal workplace and pension rights, and a substantial pay increase to compensate workers for the decades of concessions they have suffered. Workers interested in taking forward this struggle by forming a rank-and-file committee should contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact