

Unifor refuses to provide Kitimat, BC strikers any details of its talks with Rio Tinto

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The no-concessions strike by 900 workers at Rio Tinto Alcan's Kitimat aluminum smelter and powerhouse in northwestern British Columbia is in grave danger of being betrayed. Although there have been no formal negotiations since the strike began July 25, officials from Unifor met with Rio Tinto representatives in Kitimat August 12 to thrash out a plan to relaunch talks. On Wednesday, the company revealed that a further meeting will take place in Vancouver early next week.

The strikers, members of Unifor Local 2301, have received no information from the union about these unusual meetings. On the contrary, the company blurb sent out to all employees announcing next week's Vancouver meeting explicitly stated that both parties had agreed to keep the contents of the discussions "confidential." There can be little doubt about what this means: Rio Tinto and union representatives are conniving to cook up a rotten deal to end the strike on terms favourable to the company.

The strikers are fighting concession demands that include the slashing of benefit eligibility for temporary workers at the smelter and hydroelectric powerhouse, and the reduction of benefits for current retirees and all future retirees and their survivors.

Workers on the picket line 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. Fully 100 percent of the unionized workforce voted for strike action.

Workers 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. Many of the grievances concern the company's ever-expanding use of temporary contract labour, its denial of benefits to the temps by manipulating their hours of work, and its refusal to grant workers hired since 2019 defined-benefit

pensions.

The company's ruthless exploitation of its workers takes place on a global scale, and has enabled it to amass vast wealth for its executives and super-rich shareholders. The Australian-based conglomerate is the third-largest mining company in the world, with leading interests in iron ore, copper, aluminum, lithium and other minerals. Following on from a whopping US \$9.8 billion net profit in 2020, the company has just reported its highest-ever half-year earnings, racking up US \$12.2 billion in profits just in the first six months of 2021. Rio Tinto responded by announcing late last month a blockbuster dividend payout to its shareholders. The company will reward investors with \$9.1 billion at \$7.60 per share, which more than triples previous payouts. Industry analysts predict that such windfalls will continue throughout the decade, as prices for metals will remain high.

Unifor, which boasts incessantly about being "the largest private sector union in Canada," has done virtually nothing to inform its more than 300,000 members about the Kitimat strike, let alone mobilize them and the working class more broadly in support of the smelter workers' struggle against the mining multinational. This is not an oversight, but the direct product of the union's nationalist and corporatist agenda, which prioritizes the bureaucrats' relations with big business executives and the capitalist state over the interests of the workers Unifor claims to represent. While the Kitimat strikers have been isolated on the picket line on a miserable C\$400 a week in strike pay, Unifor and its allies are lavishing millions of dollars on a nationwide "Anybody but Conservative" advertising campaign, which serves to promote the re-election of the pro-war, pro-austerity Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. For his part, Trudeau has repeatedly boasted about his government's close relations with his Unifor "partners."

During last year's auto negotiations, Unifor President

Jerry Dias trumpeted the union's endorsement of the further expansion of temporary low-wage labour in the Detroit Three's plants and the entrenchment of the hated multi-tier wage system, proclaiming that the concessions-laden agreements the union reached with Ford, GM, and Fiat-Chrysler would make Canada a "competitive" location for investment.

Unifor has already made clear that it is ready to surrender key elements of the workers' demands to Rio Tinto. As the clock was ticking towards a strike on July 24, company management made it known that they were prepared to "hibernate" the majority of smelting pots at the facility rather than continue negotiations through the deadline. A union bulletin to the strikers notes, "the Company was very firm on achieving one of their demands, which amounted to a major concession for our members...In the end, considering what was at stake, we tentatively agreed to their proposed concession which would allow our members to return."

Outrageously, Unifor has never informed its members precisely what this "major concession" was. But it evidently did not go far enough for Rio Tinto. It called a halt to the discussions, ordered almost 75 percent of the pots to be hibernated and insisted that other of its concession demands were still on the table. In a statement released prior to the August 12 meeting, Rio Tinto arrogantly declared that it suspended bargaining because the union raised "too many" demands, making it impossible to reach a collective agreement "comparable with the ones we find in our other businesses in Canada or with our competitors."

The global cost-cutting record of Rio Tinto is notorious. After the 2007 purchase of Alcan, Rio Tinto (Alcan) immediately cut its aluminium production by 6 percent and shut the Beauharnois smelter in Quebec in 2009, eliminating 220 jobs. Telegraphing the company's current strategy in Kitimat, then-chief executive officer Dick Evans announced, "Our goal is to align production with customer demand and reduce our operating costs as much as possible."

If the Kitimat strikers are to prevail, they must respond to Rio Tinto's aggressive global cost-cutting drive with an international strategy of their own. Conditions are ripe for the building of a mass working-class movement to fight wage cutting, temporary contracts, the gutting of benefits, and corporate profiteering. Thousands of workers across Canada, the United States and other countries are engaged in strikes and job actions. In northeastern Quebec, 2,500 workers affiliated with the

USW recently struck the global steel giant ArcelorMittal for close to a month. Mine, mill and smelter workers at Vale's massive Sudbury, Ontario operations struck for 64 days before the USW pushed through a rapid end to the dispute, at the beginning of this month, on management's terms. De Havilland aerospace workers in Toronto, also represented by Unifor, are continuing their strike against concessions and potential massive job losses. The key task is to unify all of these struggles with those of workers in the United States, Mexico and internationally, in a working-class counteroffensive to secure decent-paying, secure jobs for all.

For the Kitimat strikers, the first step in this struggle is to draw a balance sheet of the reactionary role of the corporatist trade unions. Over the past four decades, they have repudiated any association with militant working class struggle, and in Canada, as around the world, served ever more nakedly as junior partners of management.

Rank-and-file workers must take matters into their own hands. If Unifor remains in control of the strike, it is becoming ever clearer that it will organize an abject betrayal, whether that follows directly on the heels of next week's Vancouver meeting or after another round of closed-door talks. Given Rio Tinto's bumper profits, the company may decide to make a few token gestures to Unifor, allowing the union to sell a future agreement as a "victory." This was the experience of the striking miners in Sudbury, where mining giant Vale withdrew a demand to end retiree health care benefits but concluded a deal with the USW that retains all the concessions given up over the past three decades. These include the widespread use of temporary labour and the institutionalization of a multi-tier wage system.

To prevent their struggle being betrayed, Kitimat strikers urgently require their own fighting organization. Strikers should immediately form a rank-and-file strike committee led by the most trusted and militant workers that can take action independently of Unifor, to oppose any and all give-backs and spearhead the fight to rally support from Rio Tinto and other workers across Canada and internationally.



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