

Olymel threatens to axe 500 jobs at Quebec plant after striking meatpackers reject sellout contract

Hugo Maltais**25 August 2021**

Olymel, one of Canada's largest meatpacking companies, is threatening to eliminate 500 jobs at its hog slaughtering and processing plant in Vallée-Jonction, Quebec, if the plant's 1,100 striking workers don't surrender to its demands for a concessions contract by this Sunday.

On strike since April 28, the Vallée-Jonction Olymel workers last week rejected by a margin of 57 percent a tentative contract negotiated and endorsed by the Olymel Vallée-Jonction Workers Union (STOVJ), which is affiliated with the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU).

In repudiating the tentative agreement, the Olymel strikers defied a corporate-media intimidation campaign that has sought to blame them for the difficulties faced by pork producers who can't bring their hogs to slaughter.

Olymel has responded to the rejection vote with an escalating campaign of bullying and threats. First, it provocatively announced that it couldn't offer workers a penny more because to do so would place the plant's "viability" at risk. Only if workers agreed to extend the duration of the next contract beyond the currently proposed six years could this change, it insisted. Then on Tuesday, it announced the impending elimination of the afternoon shift, and almost half of the jobs at the Vallée-Jonction facility. "This decision will come into force if no agreement is concluded and accepted by union members by midnight Sunday, August 29," declared Olymel management.

Quebec's unabashedly pro-big business Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government has been working behind the scenes for weeks to force an end to the strike on the company's terms. On Wednesday, Labour Minister Jean Boulet announced on social media that he was summoning union and management representatives to his office Thursday morning. "The [two] parties have to reach an agreement," declared Boulet. "It has to stop."

The labour minister suggested that he will press for the appointment of an arbitrator with the power to dictate the terms of the next contract on all outstanding issues. These

include wages, vacations, the establishment of a proper pension plan, and the length of the workday for nightshift workers.

Both the company and the CAQ government are relying on the STOVJ and CNTU, which have isolated and sought to demobilize the militant Olymel workers, to bring a quick end to the strike.

The Olymel workers, who have been forced to toil under unsafe conditions throughout the pandemic, walked off the job nearly four months ago determined to make substantial gains, including a significant "catch up wage increase." In 2007 and 2015 the STOVJ ended strikes by accepting concessions contracts that have reduced workers' wages and benefits by more than 40 percent in real terms.

The company's refusal to address the workers' "catch up" wage demand was a major reason the proposed contract was decisively rejected by the rank-and-file. The union-backed tentative agreement also included rollbacks on working conditions. For example, as one striker explained on social media, it would have stripped workers of the right to choose their vacation dates.

Throughout the strike, the STOVJ has kept its members in the dark about its negotiations with Olymel. The tentative agreement was reached on the night of August 13-14, and only presented to workers on the afternoon of August 16, just before the ratification vote. Due to this anti-democratic procedure, workers had no time to properly analyze the proposed contract's contents and discuss it among themselves. However, it was so obviously a surrender to Olymel that workers nonetheless voted it down. The union censored its Facebook page to delete comments that denounced its attempt to stampede workers into ending the strike, including two comments by a WSWS reporter calling for rejection of the agreement on the basis that workers did not have enough time to analyze it.

The "No" voted stunned and angered both Olymel management and the union bureaucrats. When the vote result

was announced, the August 16 meeting turned stormy as workers accused the union executive of neglecting the interests of rank-and-file members. STOVJ President Martin Maurice responded with a vulgar tirade and threatened the executive would resign en masse. The anger of the STOVJ officials was thus directed not at the company and the brutal conditions of exploitation it imposes on Olymel workers, but at the workers for daring to rebel against those conditions and the rotten agreements negotiated by the union.

Olymel and the government also reacted with fury to the workers' courageous resistance. An Olymel vice-president immediately threatened to curtail the plant's operations, claiming that the company is "at the end of its ability to pay" and that the plant's "viability and sustainability" is in jeopardy.

These are lies. Olymel is a division of the Quebec-based agribusiness giant Sollio (formerly the Coop fédérée), which had sales of more than \$8 billion in 2020. Olymel alone had profits of more than \$234 million in 2020. If the workers' demands enrage management, it is because they threaten the "viability" of the company's profits and their high salaries and bonuses.

Throughout the dispute, Olymel has received support from the Quebec Pork Producers Federation (FPPQ) and the *Union des producteurs agricoles* (Quebec farmers' union). Reprising the arguments the CAQ government used to attack and intimidate striking poultry slaughterhouse workers at Exceldor, another agri-food giant, they have claimed that the strike is forcing hog producers to slaughter livestock and "waste food." (See: Quebec establishment demands end to strike by food processing workers, invoking plight of chickens for slaughter)

FFPQ President David Duval called the Olymel workers' rejection of the tentative contract a "slap in the face" for producers, and called for Quebec Premier François Legault to personally intervene to force an end to the strike at the Vallée-Jonction plant. A multi-millionaire and former Air Transat CEO, Legault routinely demonstratively sides with corporations in labour disputes, and in recent weeks has threatened to criminalize threatened strikes by construction and public sector workers.

On August 18, Legault responded on Twitter, appealing to the parties' "sense of responsibility" to resolve the dispute, and soon after Boulet appointed a special mediator. Now, with his summoning of union and company representatives to his Quebec City office Thursday morning, Boulet intends to work in tandem with the company to force a quick end to the strike.

The labour minister has himself repeatedly raised the possibility of adopting a strikebreaking law against the Vallée-Jonction workers, only to dismiss it on the grounds

this is a "private dispute." The reality is the government would much prefer using its union partners to impose a pro-company collective agreement on the Olymel workers, so as not to run the risk of transforming a strike at a single factory into a wider and overtly political struggle by criminalizing it.

As if to highlight where the government's sympathies lie, it granted Olymel \$150 million in public funds, in the form of an 'investment,' on May 18, when the strike was about to enter its fourth week.

The Olymel strikers should be under no illusion: they are fighting not just their own ruthless employer, but the corporate media, the CAQ government and the entire ruling establishment, who all fear that their militant anti-concessions struggle could spark far broader social discontent, under conditions where the pandemic has dramatically intensified social inequality.

The Olymel strikers must also recognize that their own union is fully participating in this anti-worker conspiracy. The STOVJ and CNTU have done nothing to extend the strike. They have issued no call to the well over 10,000 workers at other Olymel plants in Quebec, Ontario and Alberta, and have responded to the company's threats to axe 500 jobs by pleading for further negotiations. In 2007, the union capitulated to a company threat to close the Vallée-Jonction slaughterhouse by accepting sweeping concessions. No doubt, it is now readying to present the membership with a "new" tentative agreement that will differ from the rejected one only by a few commas.

The struggle at Olymel can only be won if workers break the isolation imposed by the STOVJ and CNTU. A crucial first step is the formation of a rank-and-file committee, independent of and opposed to the corporatist union apparatus. Such a committee should turn to their natural allies, their class brothers and sisters in Quebec, the rest of Canada, and internationally, with the aim of making the Olymel strike the spearhead of a working-class counteroffensive against all concessions, production speed-ups and job cuts and for improved working conditions for all.



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