

Unions betray militant, 4-month strike at Quebec Olymel pork processing plant

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The Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU)-affiliated *Syndicat des travailleurs de l'usine Olymel à Vallée-Jonction* (STOVJ) recently brought an unceremonious end to the courageous four-month strike 1,100 workers in Quebec's Beauce region waged for better wages and working conditions against food-processing giant Olymel.

On August 31, the union announced that 78 percent of the workers had accepted the latest sellout agreement it had negotiated with Olymel—an agreement whose rejection the employer and union said would result in mass layoffs.

The workers were also facing intense pressure from Quebec's right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government and were the target of a virulent corporate media campaign, that cynically denounced the workers for impeding the “humanitarian” slaughter of pigs.

The new six-year contract falls far short of everything the workers were fighting for, failing to restore, let alone make up for, the huge concessions the STOVJ and CNTU ceded to the company in 2007. The new contract is patterned after a previous tentative agreement, which the workers rejected by 57 percent two weeks earlier. In so far as it provides workers any improvements, this is only because the rank-and-file workers defied the union and voted down the first tentative deal.

In the days leading up to the vote on the second tentative agreement, Olymel management sought to intimidate workers by threatening to eliminate the plant's evening shift and 500 jobs if it was not accepted. This ultimatum was immediately embraced and amplified by the CAQ government.

Olymel's parent company (Sollio, formerly Coop fédérée) had sales of over \$8 billion in 2020 and made \$234 million in profits just from its Olymel division. The company's senior vice-president, Paul Beauchamp, reacted with satisfaction to the contract ratification,

saying it will allow it to “preserve the necessary competitiveness.”

The union has made much of the fact that the new agreement contains average annual wage increases of 4.4 percent. But given how little the Olymel workers are paid, this amounts to far less than meets the eye. The total wage increase over six years is \$5.50 per hour (\$2 at signing and \$3.50 spread over the remaining five years ending in 2026). These wage “increases” don't make up for the wage and benefit cuts totalling 40 percent that were imposed on the Vallée-Jonction workers in the 2007 and 2015 contract agreements. Indeed, they barely exceed the current rate of inflation.

As for pensions, the company has agreed to the creation of a new pension plan, replacing the one abolished in 2007, but it won't even begin to pay into it for the first four years of the contract. Starting in 2025, Olymel will make meagre pension contributions equal to 0.5 percent of workers' wages and has offered to increase this to 1.5 percent in the last year of the contract, but only if workers match its contributions.

As for collective insurance, under the new contract the company will increase its contribution to 70 percent. However, a worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* this is lower than the 80 percent the company had agreed to in the rejected deal. In other words, on this issue Olymel succeeded in reducing its offer.

The contract does not include any measures to ensure the health and safety of workers amid Canada's Delta variant-driven fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is entirely consistent with the stance of the STOVJ and food industry unions in Canada and elsewhere. Throughout the pandemic, they have kept their members working in unsafe workplaces, allowing big business to accumulate profits while workers fall ill and die.

In their struggle, the workers at Olymel's Vallée-Jonction pork processing plant have shown great courage

in the face of concerted ruling class opposition. Their opponents included: Olymel with its billions in revenues and assets; the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government, which in the midst of the strike bought a \$150 million stake in the company; Quebec's pork producers; and the corporate media, which served as a mouthpiece for all these forces.

However, the workers were confronted with another enemy: the STOVJ-CSN apparatus and the entire trade union bureaucracy. The struggle at Olymel erupted in the midst of a growing wave of workers' struggles against decades of capitalist austerity and wage and benefit rollbacks and had the potential to become a rallying point for a counter-offensive of all workers in the agribusiness sector and the entire working class. But the unions did everything to isolate the Olymel strike.

STOVJ never appealed to the 15,000 Olymel employees in Quebec, New Brunswick, Ontario, Alberta and Saskatchewan to support the strikers and join them in a common fight against their employer. Similarly, the UFCW (United Food and Commercial Workers union), which is affiliated with the Quebec Federation of Labour and represents workers at other Olymel plants, did not lift a finger in support of the Vallée-Jonction strikers. As for the CSN, which purports to represent some 300,000 workers, it did nothing to mobilize them in support of the Olymel strikers and to expand the struggle against the big business assault on jobs, wages, working conditions and public services.

For months, the union kept its members in the dark about its closed-door negotiations with Olymel. In what is a blatant violation of workers' democratic rights, workers were forced to vote on the same day they were presented with the two tentative agreements, meaning they had no time to study and discuss them. And when a majority of workers rejected the first agreement in mid-August, the STOVJ leadership responded not by raising its voice against Olymel, but by denouncing the workers.

Union leaders welcomed the intervention of CAQ Labour Minister Jean Boulet when he ordered them to meet with management officials in his presence on August 25, for what, parroting the company, he called a "last chance meeting" to avoid mass layoffs. For weeks, Boulet had publicly mused about the possibility of forcing an end to the strike by imposing binding arbitration.

Predictably, the STOVJ and CNTU bureaucrats capitulated to these threats, ramming through a new agreement patterned after the one previously rejected by the rank-and-file. In an anti-democratic move that had

nothing to do with combatting the pandemic, the union organized the second vote via ZOOM. As one worker explained to the WSWs, "At our last vote, the executive didn't like being told they hadn't delivered the goods, so they did the general assembly online so that no one had a say." Prior to the second vote, another worker commented, "We are fighting against the employer, against the union, against the CNTU, against the producers."

Olymel workers, and the entire working class, must learn from this bitter experience. Time and again, workers in Quebec, Canada and internationally have waged militant struggles that have been torpedoed by the corporatist unions. Over the past four decades, these bureaucratic apparatuses have repudiated any association with the class struggle and integrated themselves ever more fully into corporate management. Workers can defend their most basic class interests only by organizing independently of the pro-capitalist union apparatuses and by turning to their true allies: workers in all sectors throughout Quebec, Canada and the world.

In the face of the unions' betrayals and the increased dangers from the fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, meatpacking workers must form rank-and-file safety committees. These committees should unite with other sections of workers in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which has been founded to mobilize the full social power of the global working class to defend workers' social rights and jobs and oppose the ruling class's disastrous pandemic policy of prioritizing profits over saving lives.



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