

Interview with a worker at LM Wind Power:

Savage exploitation at flagship plant of “green” Canadian capitalism

Louis Girard
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The World Socialist Web Site recently conducted an interview with a worker at the LM Wind Power plant in Gaspé, Quebec, which produces wind-turbine blades. The company, which is a subsidiary of the transnational General Electric, employs more than 174,000 people in more than a dozen countries, including Denmark, Spain, the United States, India, China, Poland and Canada. GE, which bought LM WindPower for \$1.65 billion five years ago, had 2020 revenues of \$75.6 billion.

Justin Trudeau’s federal Liberal government and François Legault’s CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec) provincial government announced a combined C\$54 million investment in the plant last July in an effort to “strengthen the competitiveness of this key economic sector” for Canadian capitalism.

Trudeau said, “We have the skills ... here in Canada to be leaders in clean technologies and our government will continue to ... develop our industrial advantage.” The plant has been called “inordinately productive” by the Quebec government. With the new investments, it will be able to produce 350-foot blades, currently the longest in the world.

Notwithstanding its “pro-environment” posture, the Canadian ruling class sees climate change as an opportunity to make huge profits and develop a geostrategic advantage over its imperialist rivals.

About 380 people currently work at the plant in the Gaspésie, a region that has been hard hit by unemployment for decades. With the new government investments, the company has promised to add 200 new positions.

Jeremy (not his real name) worked at the plant in 2019.

WSWS: What are the working conditions like?

Jeremy (J): Before we started working, we had to do a

two-week training in safety procedures. It was from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. and was unpaid. What we learned during this training was not implemented in the plant. What was required was to work fast.

We were constantly working with various toxic materials. Wind turbine blades are made of fiber that sticks to clothing and makes big red spots on the body. It irritates the skin. We had to change our clothes when we left work, because if we didn’t, we would bring this fiber everywhere.

When the glue and resin were brought in to be put into the blade, there was a risk of explosion if the glue mixed with the resin. It didn’t happen when I worked there, but colleagues told me that some workers had had serious injuries. I had cuts on my arms and wrists from one of the tasks I had to do.

At one point, I was almost killed. I had to use a vacuum cleaner to remove things in the wind turbine blade. The pressure in this vacuum is enormous and it has to be removed slowly, but I was not aware of this. I did the process wrong and the hose suddenly went right over my head. Neither my crew chief, who had asked me to do this task, nor the supervisor, nor the health and safety officer, warned me of what could happen. However, another young worker had already done the same maneuver as me and the hose had hit his helmet. He lost consciousness and I don’t know what happened to him afterwards.

Also, there were moving platforms on the sides of the blade mould that we had to remove once or twice a shift. They weighed hundreds of pounds and the wheels were very worn out so every time we pulled or pushed them, it would come close to falling on us.

WSWS: What were the work hours like?

J: We worked alternating a 64-hour week and a 24-hour week. It was 12-hour shifts: 3 hours of work, 15-minute

break, 3 hours of work, 30-minute lunch, 3 hours of work, 15-minute break, 3 hours of work. And we only had wooden benches to rest on. No sofa.

After 8 hours of work in a day or 40 hours in a week, we continued to be paid the regular rate. Overtime was only paid after 12 consecutive hours of work. Some people worked overtime to support their families, to pay for their car or their house. I saw night workers—who worked from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. the next day—taking “speed” (amphetamines). They were doing it because there aren’t many people who can work that long. Many were taking drugs just to be able to do their jobs.

WSWS: Are there any other things you want to add about the working conditions?

J: Those who worked a full year only got 8 days of vacation. As for the pay, it was \$19 an hour. One of my colleagues had worked in the plant for 13 years and his salary had not increased.

When several people on my team went on vacation during the summer, they put intense pressure on us to achieve the same level of productivity, but with a smaller team. There was always a chart that said which plant was the most productive. We were competing with our colleagues in India, Brazil, China, the United States and France.

From what I’ve learned from people who live there, the plant never closed during the pandemic. I think it’s probably very dangerous in that plant because you come in contact with a lot of people and it’s poorly ventilated.

WSWS: Was there a union?

J: Yes. It was very much encouraged by the administration that you join the union. What we wanted was more safety in the plant and air conditioning, because it’s a big metal plant and in the summertime the temperature was well over 30 degrees Celsius [86 degrees Fahrenheit]. We had to work in plastic clothes because of the chemicals we were working with, so we felt a lot of heat. We also wanted better wages.

But the union was having pizza parties. They would give us new benches or new gloves. It had nothing to do with the interests of the workers in the plant.

WSWS: Have there been any strikes or other protest actions in recent years?

J: Not to my knowledge. There was a lot of dissatisfaction among the workers with their working conditions. They recognized the pressure the company was putting on them. There was a certain level of class consciousness. Many workers in the plant shared the feeling that the company does what it wants and that it has

the support of the state, the law, the police. I think many of them would be up for a strike, but they don’t trust the union.

Recent developments at the LM Wind Power plant in Gaspé highlight the anti-worker role of the trade unions, which have become an industrial police force for imposing employer demands, including the scrapping of the eight-hour day, a key historical conquest of the labor movement.

In 2020, the plant’s union, an affiliate of the CNTU (Confederation of National Trade Unions), refused to call a strike despite a strike vote by the members. The employer’s offer was finally accepted by 70 percent, after the rank-and-file had rejected two previous rotten contract offers, because workers lacked any confidence their union would do anything to defend them. The new contract provided “increases” below the inflation rate and maintained the same dangerous conditions described in the interview, which were further exacerbated by management’s insistence the plant remain open during the pandemic so profits continued to flow.

Last July, the local union president, Denis Giroux, along with other CNTU representatives, gloated over the wage increases that Wind Power granted after receiving the massive federal-provincial government subsidy. Wages are now slated to rise nearly \$5 an hour between 2020 and 2026, or about \$2.50 an hour more than in the union-negotiated collective agreement.

The company’s bosses and shareholders, who are making handsome profits by trampling upon the health and safety of workers, calculate that this modest increase (still barely above the inflation rate) will help with employee retention and quell the growing opposition among the workforce to levels of exploitation associated with the 19th century—an opposition that is growing in Quebec and Canada, as around the world.



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