

Strike by 630 workers at Glencore's Raglan Mine in northern Quebec enters second month

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Around 630 workers—members of the United Steelworkers (USW)—at the Raglan Mine in northern Quebec, Canada, have been engaged in an indefinite strike since May 27, after voting by a massive 97.5 percent to walk off the job. Faced with rampant inflation and the company's indifference to the plight of its workers, the strikers are determined to fight against subcontracting and attacks on their working and living conditions.

Glencore Group, Raglan's owner, responded to the strike by announcing the suspension of its mining operations and the return of workers to their respective home regions. On Friday, June 17, it resumed some operations using subcontractors. "We are very concerned, to say the least, about the type of work being done at the mine and by whom," said a miner who is a member of the union negotiating team. One day earlier, around 80 strikers picketed the Rouyn-Noranda airport in southwestern Quebec, where miners fly in and out of the Raglan facility.

The Raglan Mine is located in the remote northern region of Nunavik, on the Ungava Peninsula, 1800 km north of Montreal. Located between the villages of Salluit and Kangiqsujaq, the mine relies on local Inuit communities to make up 20 percent of its workforce. As with many natural resource operations in the region, the Raglan Mine plays a key role in the local economy, with a significant portion of local residents involved in one way or another in the mine's operations.

In spite of its name, the Raglan Mine is in fact a mining complex composed of four underground mines. While the mine primarily processes nickel, workers also extract other lucrative precious metals. In 2020, miners extracted nearly 40,000 tons of nickel, 9,000 tons of copper and more than 800 tons of cobalt. This large-scale output continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, as the government gave the mining industry the green light to continue operations and expose miners to the lethal coronavirus.

According to an estimate published by the USW, based on

the company's production data, miners extracted natural resources worth US\$586 million in 2020. Considering that the price of nickel has more than doubled since 2020, and that the price of other metals has also risen significantly, revenues in 2022 could exceed \$1 billion.

Despite the huge profits made at the operation, Glencore is denying its workers any genuine improvement in their conditions. Instead, the international conglomerate is intensifying its attacks on their jobs and working conditions.

A blatant example of management's ruthless attacks on workers was the dismissal in March 2021 of unionized security workers at the Raglan Mine, after they rejected an offer from the company to renew their collective agreement. In a ruling issued on June 15, the Quebec Administrative Labour Tribunal condemned this action, which it determined was motivated by a desire to send "a clear message from the company to the other units (of unionized workers) that will soon be negotiating."

As is the case for the vast majority of workers in the mining industry, Raglan's workers live and work under harsh conditions. In addition to the "fly-in fly-out" procedure and the distance from their families, the workers labour 11 hours a day for 21 days in a row, followed by 14 days off.

Under these conditions and with inflation eating away at what little financial leeway families have left, the workers are determined to fight for their interests. They are demanding better wages, decent working conditions and an improved vacation plan. They also oppose Glencore's increased use of subcontracting.

In addition to lower wages and fewer benefits, the use of subcontractors has increased so much in recent years that nearly half of the mine's 1,200 employees work for a third party. This practice allows the multinational to save large sums of money, while all workers at the mine complex pay for this through stepped-up internal competition.

The company unquestionably has the financial means to

meet the workers' modest demands. Following its merger with Xstrata in 2013, the Glencore Group is one of the largest natural resource companies in the world.

Active in 35 countries, the company operates around 150 mining, metals and oil production facilities. Glencore is the largest nickel producer in Quebec and the fourth largest in the world. The company is headed by Ivan Glasenberg, Australia's ninth richest man, who has a personal fortune of \$12.2 billion.

While they face a multinational corporation determined to cut production costs to increase profits, the 630 striking workers also confront the union bureaucracy of the USW, which is affiliated with the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL). The USW is working tirelessly to keep the strikers isolated, as shown by its announcement of just four one-time picket lines over two weeks, with Rouyn-Noranda being the last on the list.

The only small gesture of solidarity has come from USW Local 6586 at the ArcelorMittal plant in Contrecoeur northeast of Montreal, which is providing limited financial assistance of \$1,100 per week. Yet the USW boasts that it is the largest private sector union in Quebec, with 60,000 members across a range of economic sectors. Beyond Quebec's provincial borders, the union has over a million active and retired members across Canada, the United States and the Caribbean. However, the USW has refused to mobilize the full strength of its membership in support of the Raglan workers, leaving them to fight the global mining giant alone.

The Raglan strikers should draw the lessons from the USW's betrayal of a massive strike vote by workers at Arconic's aluminum facilities in Iowa, Tennessee, and Indiana earlier this month. Despite the overwhelming support for a strike among the workers, the USW blocked strike action before announcing a last-minute agreement with the company. The USW then rammed through the concessions-filled deal, which included real-terms pay cuts and the abolition of a performance bonus scheme, amid widespread speculation by workers that the voting process was rigged. "It felt like the union leadership was working for the company," an Arconic worker told the WSWS.

While the USW felt compelled to call a strike at Raglan, it is feverishly working with the company behind the scenes to impose a similar sellout. USW and Glencore representatives have met on several occasions with a mediator appointed by the Quebec Labour Ministry led by the hard-right Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) government. CAQ Premier Francois Legault, a multi-millionaire and former Air Transat CEO, has denounced wage levels in the province's manufacturing sector as "too high."

The pro-capitalist union apparatus enjoys a cozy

relationship with corporate executives and the state apparatus, which finds expression in the corrupt practices of union bureaucrats. A series of recent court decisions revealed that at least four USW local officials in Canada were involved in embezzlement schemes. According to *Nouvelles TVA*, the union representatives used their positions to charge the union for personal expenses, issue duplicate bills and even write blank checks to each other. Unable to pay back the money, one of the former bureaucrats had his house seized last week.

The Raglan workers are not alone in their struggle. Over the past year, a wave of strikes has erupted among mine workers around the world—from the nickel mines of Sudbury in northern Ontario and the coalfields of Alabama to the Atacama Desert of Chile and the jungles of Colombia—demanding substantial wage increases and the restoration of hard-won gains.

The upsurge of struggles among miners internationally underscores that the conditions exist for Raglan workers to win their strike. To do so, they must break with the nationalist, pro-capitalist USW and create their own rank-and-file committee. The committee should fight for the expansion of the strike by making a powerful appeal to miners across Canada and internationally to wage a common fight against the multi-billion-dollar mining conglomerates. The striking miners should also link up their strike with working people battling the rising cost of living across Canada and around the world for a joint counteroffensive to defend jobs, wages and working conditions.



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