

Thousands of Quebec workers join strikes and protests against big business assault on wages, working conditions

Hugo Maltais
21 July 2022

According to data from the provincial Ministry of Labour, as of July 8 there were 48 strikes or lockouts involving more than 10,000 workers in Quebec. This large number indicates a sharp increase in working class resistance—replicated across Canada’s other provinces and internationally—to the big business assault on working conditions.

Rolls-Royce workers still locked out

The 530 workers who maintain aircraft engines for Rolls-Royce Canada in Lachine on the Island of Montreal are still locked out. They voted 94 percent in favor of strike action on March 15. In response, the employer locked them out the same day. Without a contract since March 2020, the workers are opposing Rolls-Royce’s attempt to end the workers’ defined-benefit pension plan and freeze wages for the years 2020 and 2021. They are also demanding improvements to their working conditions.

In response, the company has resorted to employing scabs and is attempting to have 150 of the locked-out workers convicted of contempt of court for alleged violations of injunctions, issued by the pro-employer courts, that limit picketing.

Raglan Mine strike continues

The indefinite strike by 630 workers at the Raglan Mine in northern Quebec continues. The work stoppage was called on May 27 after a 97.5 percent vote in favour of strike action. The workers are demanding decent working conditions, better wages and an improved vacation plan.

Subcontracting is also a major issue: almost half of the mine’s 1,200 employees work for a subcontractor. This practice allows the mine’s owner, the multinational Glencore, to make significant savings, through inferior wages and working conditions.

Glencore is an extremely profitable company. Benefiting from the high price of the metals, including nickel, that are extracted at the Raglan Mine, Glencore recorded net profits of more than US\$9 billion in 2021. These profits were used to bury accusations of market manipulation (US\$1.5 billion), and to enrich shareholders (US\$4

billion in dividends) and executives (US\$10.4 million for CEO Gary Nagle alone).

The Raglan Mine workers are represented by the United Steelworkers (USW) union, which is affiliated with the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL) and Canadian Labour Congress. Forced to call a strike due to the workers’ anger and militancy, the union bureaucracy is determined to isolate their struggle. Rather than mobilize the 60,000 Quebec members of the Steelworkers or the 600,000 members of the QFL, it has sought to quarantine the strike. Only three small demonstrations have been organized by the union, the last of which took place more than a month ago on June 14.

On July 7, the union negotiators left the bargaining table, claiming “bad faith” on the part of the employer. On July 10, the company presented a new “comprehensive offer” which was subsequently overwhelmingly rejected by the rank-and-file, with more than 76 percent voting for rejection. According to the USW, management’s latest offer was even “worse” than that which triggered the strike.

Strike at Agropur dairy

On June 29, 250 workers at the Agropur milk-processing plant in Granby, a city 100 km east of Montreal, began an unlimited strike. The workers, who have been without a contract for over a year, are seeking improved wages, under conditions where Canada’s inflation is above 8 percent. But the most contentious issue is management’s attempt to impose new, onerous work schedules.

A cooperative owned by about 375 producers, Agropur achieved net earnings (profits) of \$274 million last year, a significant increase from the \$39 million recorded in 2020. At the company’s annual meeting, its president, Roger Massicotte, attributed Agropur’s “increased profitability” to “effective cost control measures.” Obviously, these “effective measures” include attacks on workers’ terms of employment and working conditions.

According to the workers’ bargaining agent, which is an affiliate of the Centrale des syndicats démocratiques (CSD, Federation of Democratic Unions), Agropur wants to modify the work schedules that have been in place since the 1980s. Its demands include a 4-hour lengthening of the workday and different schedules depending on the day of the week, thus complicating work/life balance. Agropur has all but confirmed these charges by stating that it wants more “flexibility.”

A few days after the strike began, the corporate media published a series of alarmist articles about millions of liters of milk being thrown away because they could not be processed at the Granby plant, which processes 800,000 liters of milk per day, or 10 percent of all milk production in Quebec. Reminiscent of last summer's campaign on the fate of chickens euthanized because of the strike at Exceldor's Saint-Anselme plant, these stories of milk "waste" are intended to bully workers into ceding to the company's demands and/or justify an intervention by the Quebec government on behalf of the company.

On July 8, a few days after these articles were published, the union offered to call off the strike if Agropur dropped its demands on work schedules. This proposal would have sent the workers back to the plant while the union and Agropur negotiated the other issues in dispute.

Signaling its opposition to decent working hours, Agropur did not respond to this offer. However, the parties resumed negotiations on July 12, and the next day Agropur tabled a "proposal" that has not been made public.

Unifor betrays Via Rail workers' struggle

Last week Unifor—the union that represents 2,400 maintenance workers, on-board personnel and ticket agents at Via Rail—scuttled an impending strike against the federal government-owned passenger rail carrier.

After pushing back several strike "deadlines," Unifor announced it had reached a tentative contract agreement with Via. Even though workers had yet to see the agreement, let alone vote on it, Unifor titled its press release "strike averted," demonstrating once again the union bureaucrats' contempt for the democratic rights of the membership and their eagerness to suppress worker job action.

Faced with several employer concession demands, including on job security, the 2,400 Via Rail workers had voted 99 percent in favor of strike action in a vote held between June 20 and July 1.

Unifor, Canada's largest private-sector union, was slow to act on the overwhelming vote. Only on July 8 did it give the legally-required 72-hour notice of a work stoppage that was set to begin at 12:01 a.m. Monday, July 11. A few hours before the strike deadline, Unifor pushed back the start of the strike to 4:00 p.m. Monday, then to 6:00 p.m., 8:00 p.m., and finally to midnight to allow for last-minute negotiations. A tentative agreement was announced the next day.

The union has refused to provide any information on the content of the tentative agreement, stating that "details of the new contract will be released once the agreement has been ratified by the membership," thereby presumptuously assuming the rank-and-file will endorse its agreement with Via.

The labor disputes at Rolls-Royce, Raglan Mine, Agropur and Via Rail are just a few examples of the growing militancy within the working class in Quebec and Canada, which is part of a global resurgence of class struggle.

On July 11, these strikes and job actions were joined by 1,100 paramedics in Montreal and Laval who work for the government-owned Urgences-Santé ambulance service. To protest the intolerable conditions under which they are being forced to work because of decades of social spending cuts and the authorities' ruinous handling of the pandemic, which has led to successive waves of mass infection

and death, the workers started to insist on taking the lunch break to which they are entitled. For years management has forbidden workers to take breaks, citing staff shortages.

Demonstrating the anti-worker character of the state-regulated labour relations system, a Quebec government administrative tribunal ruled July 16 in favour of the employer. It declared the job action illegal and threatened workers with legal sanctions if they didn't immediately stop their protest.

Irrespective of their nationality, the language they speak, or the colour of their skin, workers everywhere face the same fundamental problems: the intensifying COVID-19 pandemic, rampant inflation, deteriorating working conditions, gross social inequality and the commitment of vast resources to war.

However, as demonstrated by Unifor's betrayal of the Via Rail workers' struggle, as well as the behavior of the union bureaucrats involved in the negotiations at Agropur and Raglan Mine, the working class cannot solve these problems without first gaining its independence from the corrupt unions that act as an industrial police force for big business and the capitalist state.

The unions' response to the greatest crisis of global capitalism since the 1930s has been to deepen their decades-long corporatist policy of working with management and the state to suppress rank-and-file opposition to endless concessions and austerity.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the unions supported the federal Liberal government's bailout of corporations with hundreds of billions of dollars of public money. Then they helped the ruling class shift the burden of debt onto the working class by enforcing the official back-to-work and back-to-school policy as the coronavirus continued to rage, creating the conditions for seven deadly waves of the pandemic to date. And it is with the full support of the unions across Canada, including in Quebec, that the New Democratic Party has formed a governmental alliance with the federal Trudeau Liberal government. The social-democrats have pledged to keep the minority Liberal government in power until June 2025, as it wages war, implements "post-pandemic" capitalist austerity, and enforces inflation-driven real-wage cuts.

To assert their class interests, Quebec workers must build their own rank-and-file committees, in opposition to the pro-capitalist unions, and reach out to workers in struggle in the rest of Canada, the US and overseas. The goal must be a unified struggle of workers as an independent political force in defense of wages, pensions and social programs and for a science-based policy to eliminate COVID-19.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact