

Locked-out Montreal Rolls-Royce aeronautics workers denounce multinational's concession demands

Éric Marquis, Laurent Lafrance
17 August 2022

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team attended a demonstration by workers at the Rolls-Royce engine plant in Montreal on August 10. The plant's 530 workers were locked out by the company on March 15, the same day they voted 94 percent in favor of strike action. Despite the company's intransigence, the workers are determined to resist the multinational company's concessions demands and improve their living standards in the face of galloping inflation.

WSWS reporters spoke with workers to learn more about the months-long dispute and discuss the broader political issues raised by their struggle. Workers also spoke about the tense work environment at the plant, which has deteriorated further since the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our reporters explained the need for workers to take control of the struggle out of the hands of the *Conseil des syndicats nationaux* (CSN) trade union apparatus and build a rank-and-file committee, so that they can advance their own demands and rally support from other sections of the working class in Quebec, all of Canada and beyond. They also discussed auto worker Will Lehman's campaign for the presidency of the United Auto Workers union in the US, and the need for workers in Canada to support his candidacy, which is aimed at unifying workers' struggles across all national borders.

Jean-Philippe, an engine inspector, was picketing with a colleague who has about 15 years of experience. He explained the impact of the company's demand for the elimination of the workers' defined-benefit pension plan. "A representative tells us it will result in an average loss of \$125,000 per worker when they retire," he said. "The average worker who has just 10 years of

service here is going to lose the most." Jean-Philippe denounced Rolls-Royce for seeking to impose massive contract concessions, while it "is making \$538 million in profits, just at the plant here."

His colleague added that during the pandemic, the plant had two record years. "They declared us essential workers, but now they haven't needed us for five months," she commented. Referring to the engines serviced at the plant for the private planes of the rich and famous, Jean-Philippe said, "It was 'essential' to make people who are rich and want to go to Bora-Bora richer."

"If the conflict has lasted for 5 months or more," he added, "it's thanks to the money that the company got during the pandemic. It is the workers' money that this company uses to continue to impoverish the workers. It makes no sense."

Jean-Philippe's co-worker explained that the company has taken advantage of the pandemic to increase worker exploitation. "Now they don't want to allow any flexibility in our schedules or work-life balance," she said. "It's mandatory fixed hours, it's completely different. It's our collective agreement that they are violating." She went on to say, "We were supposed to have a production performance bonus for 2021, but management never gave it to us before they locked us out. So they took away our bonus, cut our personal insurance, life insurance, dental insurance, they cut everything. They also didn't pay me my vacation pay for 2021. Shouldn't call that theft when much of my 2021 salary hasn't been paid?"

She also strongly denounced the recent installation of 33 cameras inside the plant to monitor the workers' actions. "In aeronautics, cameras are usually not

allowed by Transport Canada because the risk of error is very high,” she explained. “It’s an added stress. I don’t need the stress of knowing my boss is watching me every two minutes. There’s even a camera pointed at the computer keyboard I use to enter my passwords.”

Jean-Philippe also talked about Rolls-Royce’s lawsuit against 150 employees whose protest in a park Rolls-Royce maintains was too close to a manager’s home. “The company sent letters by bailiff to at least 150 for contempt of court. For picketing in a public park! I thought in Quebec we had the right to demonstrate peacefully.”

Edno (an engine inspector) and Pierre (a machinist) also spoke to the WSWS. Edno said, “In aviation, if you do a bad job, you can kill 300 people. We have big responsibilities. We are not here to play. Our job has value.”

He went on to explain that under Rolls Royce’s new proposed pension plan, “workers are going to lose \$10,000 to \$15,000 a year in their retirement. I have twelve years of experience with the company here and while I’m going to lose, I’m not going to lose as much as some of my colleagues who have less seniority. They’re the ones I’m fighting for.”

Pierre said the cameras were installed after the union initiated brief 10-15 minute demonstrations inside the plant during which workers stopped work. “In addition to the cameras, they brought in security guards who were watching us. They were taking pictures, they were filming us.”

Edno expressed shock and anger at the obvious inequities between Rolls-Royce managers and workers. “In England, they gave £3 million to a top manager who was leaving. Why do they have money for these people, but not for us who operate the machines?” he asked. “During the pandemic, 70 percent of our salary was paid by the government (under its wage subsidy program). The company didn’t lose money. And they didn’t pay our bonuses and they didn’t pay our vacation weeks. It’s my money, it’s illegal!”

Edno said he thought that “the unions should go on a general strike across Canada. All the unions in all the companies should go out on strike. There, that will produce a change!” When WSWS reporters explained why the pro-corporate trade unions refuse to fight seriously to defend their members, the two workers commented that “the union has become a business.”

During a discussion of social inequality and the historical parallels to the period of the French Revolution in the late 18th century, Pierre said, “I read an article about the ‘new monarchs’ of today based on fortunes that are built over generations. They are the top 1 percent and we are their subjects and they’re making more and more money. It’s a pendulum that’s swinging back. It’s these little monarchies that are pulling the strings and telling the government what to do.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact