

Rolls-Royce locks out 530 Montreal airplane engine plant workers for 5 months

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For more than five months Rolls-Royce has locked out 530 machinists and other workers at its Montreal airplane engine plant.

The company imposed the lockout last March 15, the same day that the workers voted 94 percent in favour of strike action.

Rolls-Royce is also withholding vacation pay, production bonuses, and essential benefits. “They took away our bonuses, cut our personal insurance, life insurance, dental insurance, they cut everything,” one worker told WSWs reporters at an August 10 demonstration outside the plant.

On May 11, the locked out workers rejected by 95 percent a concessions-filled company contract offer. At the end of July, the Union of Rolls-Royce Canada Workers (STTRRC), which is affiliated with the *Confédération des syndicats nationaux* (CSN-Confederation of National Trade Unions), presented its members with a second, equally rotten management offer, which they rejected by 75 percent. The company is counting on demoralization among the workers, whose struggle has been systematically isolated by the CSN, to impose major contract concessions.

Rolls-Royce is a British-based multinational company specializing in the manufacture of luxury cars and civil and military aircraft engines. In 2021, it had revenues of more than US\$13 billion, including US\$4 billion from military contracts with the United States for “the next few decades.” In Canada, Rolls-Royce has long-term partnerships with the federal government. This includes, through its Defence Aerospace arm, contracts with the Department of National Defence and the Royal Canadian Air Force.

A major issue in the dispute at the Montreal plant is the company's insistence that the massive pension cuts it imposed, with union complicity, on employees hired after March 24, 2013, be extended to the entire workforce. This involves eliminating the defined-benefit pension plan and replacing it with a defined-contribution plan, thereby shifting all financial risk from the company to the workers.

Rolls-Royce workers told the WSWs that such a change could mean losses of more than \$125,000 per worker. The company also wants to impose a two-year wage freeze for the years 2020-2021, and below-inflation pay increases in subsequent years.

Management's intransigence is part of a big business assault on workers in Canada and internationally. The pandemic has intensified this process as banks, the wealthy and corporations, including Rolls-Royce, have received billions of dollars in “bailouts” from federal and provincial governments. Workers pointed out to the WSWs that at the beginning of the pandemic, 70 per cent of employees' salaries were paid by the federal government under its “wage-subsidy” scheme. The ruling class, which grotesquely enriched itself while workers were sent back to work in the midst of the pandemic, is now demanding an accelerated transfer of social wealth from the bottom to the top.

In their struggle, the Rolls-Royce workers face not only a ruthless multinational corporation and its government supporters and advocates, but the union apparatus, which functions as a corporatist partner of management.

Led by highly-paid bureaucrats who fully accept the company's “right” to make profits on the backs of workers, the STTRRC and the CSN have done nothing to mobilize the 300,000 CSN members to stand with the locked-out Rolls-Royce workers, let alone the entire working class, which is also entering into struggle and facing the same assault on its living conditions.

The unions' nationalist strategy is doomed to failure in the face of the ability of a multinational corporation like Rolls-Royce to shift production wherever it wants, something the company has boasted about doing throughout the lockout. “We have moved work across our global service network to ensure we can continue to provide the high level of support our customers expect,” said Rolls-Royce spokesman Donald Campbell.

An overview of the Rolls-Royce lockout and other recent worker struggles in the Montreal area shows that the unions are acting to demobilize their members and allow the concessions demanded by big business to be imposed. What the union bureaucrats are seeking to preserve, first and foremost, is their “seat at the table”—their cozy relationship with the government and big business, and their six-figure incomes and privileges.

During a recent union “raiding” operation, the Montreal Rolls-Royce workers switched their union allegiance from the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace

Workers (IAMAW), which had represented them for 66 years, to the CSN and its Manufacturing Industry Federation (CSN-FIM). Workers told the WWS that senior officials of the IAMAW, affiliated to the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), were cronies of management who conspired against the workers. After the raid, the IAMAW walked away with the workers' strike fund. But the CSN also has a long history of betraying workers' struggles, including last year's militant 4-month strike by the poorly-paid workers at the Olymel slaughterhouse in Vallée-Jonction.

Through its *Fondaction* investment fund, the CSN and its executives receive money from shareholders and invest in private companies, among other things. These investment funds, like the FTQ-Solidarity Fund, embody the corporatist relationship that the union apparatus has with big business and the state. The unions today play the role of an industrial police force dedicated to suppressing the class struggle and imposing concessions on workers to boost corporate profits.

In March, STTRRC President Frédéric Labelle said he was ready to make key contract concessions. Noting that employees already have “good wages,” he said he was “open” to dropping the union's demand for 5 percent annual pay increase for five years—which already would have represented a drop in workers' real wages, considering that inflation was on the gallop and is now above 8 percent.

But the Rolls-Royce workers have shown great combativeness, in what is part of a mounting wave of worker struggles across Canada. As of July, there were 48 strikes or lockouts involving more than 10,000 workers underway in Quebec alone. Major disputes have broken out across the province, including at the Raglan mine in northern Quebec, at the Agropur dairy in Granby and at Molson-Coors in the Montérégie. In each case the issues are the same: companies are demanding major concessions from workers to swell profits and satisfy their wealthy shareholders.

Instead of encouraging Rolls-Royce workers to unite their struggle with those of their class brothers and sisters, the CSN is looking to the social forces that are at the root of worker exploitation.

It is in this spirit that the STTRRC organized a demonstration in front of the provincial premier's office in Montreal to “explain” to Quebec Premier François Legault that his government is subsidizing a company that neglects its employees. As if Legault, himself a multi-millionaire and former CEO of Air Transat, didn't know that! Continuing to sow illusions in Legault and his anti-worker government, Labelle added that he is “giving Legault a chance to correct the record” in anticipation of this fall's provincial elections.

Legault's CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec) government has a long history of obtrusively intervening in labor disputes on the side of big business. During the lockout at the Bécancour Aluminum Smelter (ABI) in 2018, Legault denounced wage levels in Quebec's manufacturing sector for being “too high.”

Following the same austerity policies as previous Parti Québécois (PQ) and Liberal governments, the CAQ advocates social spending cuts, the privatization of public services and tax cuts for big business and the rich, while promoting Quebec chauvinism. Last year, Legault threatened to use back-to-work legislation against public sector workers, before imposing concessionary contracts on more than half-a-million public sector workers, with the assistance of the unions.

It is telling that STTRRC President Labelle is himself running as a candidate in the October 3 provincial election under the banner of the Parti Québécois. The PQ is a big business party that imposed the worst social cuts in the province's history when it was in power in the late 1990s, and has since made a further marked shift to the right and to anti-immigrant chauvinism.

The locked-out Rolls-Royce workers must reject the nationalist, pro-capitalist policies of the STTRRC and the CSN, which only serve to isolate and demobilize them. They must recognize that they have powerful allies: the tens of thousands of other Rolls-Royce workers around the world, and all workers in Quebec, across Canada and internationally who are facing the same generalized assault on their living conditions and the ruling class' “profits before lives” pandemic policy.

To make a strong appeal to other sections of the working class in a common struggle against the concessions imposed by the capitalist class, the Rolls-Royce workers in Montreal must form their own rank and file committee, completely independent of the union bureaucracy.

A similar initiative has already been taken in Canada by education workers and CP Rail workers, who have established rank-and-file committees in association with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). This alliance, formed at the initiative of the *World Socialist Web Site*, is a network of rank-and-file committees being built on every continent to develop a working-class counter-offensive against the transnational corporations and the pro-war, pro-austerity capitalist governments that serve them. It already involves workers in manufacturing, rail, the public sector and many other sectors on five continents.

By joining the IWA-RFC, Rolls-Royce workers will be able to have democratic discussions on the critical political issues that underlie their struggle, while coordinating their demands and actions with workers around the world.



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