

At protest against Amazon's closing of all its Quebec facilities, unions promote nationalist boycott campaign

Our reporters

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Postal and logistics workers around the world are under assault! The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and the US Postal Service Workers Rank-and-File Committee are holding an online public meeting this Sunday, February 23 to discuss a strategy to fight back. We encourage all Amazon and Canada Post workers to click here to register for the event.

In response to the decision of the online-retail giant Amazon to close all its Quebec facilities by the end of March, the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (Confederation of National Trade Unions, CNTU) organized a demonstration in Montreal last Saturday under the slogan "Boycott Amazon."

Far from serving to mobilize a broad movement of the North American working class to fight the multinational, the union-initiated boycott campaign is a reactionary nationalist diversion. It is aimed at strengthening the Quebec and Canadian capitalist elite in their reactionary trade war with Washington, and at upholding the material interests of the union bureaucracy, by highlighting its role in containing and policing worker opposition.

Last month, Amazon announced the impending closure of all seven of its depots and warehouses in Quebec, eliminating 1,700 permanent jobs, 250 part-time positions, and more than 2,500 contract delivery jobs. The closure was a savage response to workers' effort to collectively assert their interests by forming union locals affiliated to the CNTU.

It came in the midst of what were supposed to be negotiations for a first collective agreement covering the 300 workers at Amazon's DTX4 warehouse in the Montreal suburb of Laval, and while workers were mounting union organizing drives at several other warehouses.

With this mass dismissal, Amazon—a mega-company headed by Jeff Bezos, the world's second richest individual—wants to make an example of its Quebec employees, in order to intimidate any group of workers that would try to use their collective power to oppose its brutal methods of exploitation. It is no accident that Amazon took this dictatorial step just days after Bezos joined Elon Musk and other capitalist oligarchs at the inauguration of the would-be fascist dictator Donald Trump as US president.

There is an immense potential to challenge Amazon, the entire financial oligarchy, and the governments that act as their political servants. There is a resurgence of class struggle around the globe, including in Canada and Quebec. To cite but two examples: half-a-million Quebec public sector workers mounted a powerful strike movement at the end of 2023 and 55,000 Canada Post workers waged a month-long strike late last year against the state-owned company's attempt to "Amazonify" postal services.

However, time and again the union apparatuses have intervened to isolate and suppress workers' struggles. They will not—and indeed due to

their nationalist, pro-capitalist character cannot—wage the type of militant, international struggle needed to counter the attacks of globally mobile corporations like Amazon.

Such a struggle requires systematic efforts to mobilize Amazon's 1.5 million employees worldwide, as well as other postal and logistics workers, in the fight to secure permanent jobs and decent pay and working conditions for all. It must employ the methods of class struggle, including demonstrations, strikes, and general strikes, and involve preparations to mobilize workers in defiance of anti-strike laws and the capitalist state apparatus that enforce them.

This perspective is diametrically opposed to that advanced by the CNTU. Its boycott campaign is based on an appeal to individual consumers to forego purchasing products from Amazon, although it may be more convenient and cheaper to do so, not mobilizing the social power of the working class. In same right-wing vein, the CNTU is urging workers expend their energies in pressing the federal Liberal and CAQ-led Quebec governments—loyal servants of big business—to intervene on their behalf.

The dead end of this orientation, and the refusal of the CNTU, and for that matter of the other unions, like the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the Steelworkers (USW), Unifor and the Quebec Federation of Labor (QFL), to mobilize the working class in defence of the sacked Amazon workers was reflected at Saturday's demonstration. Barely 2,000 people took part, including at most a few hundred Amazon workers. Both politically and in its composition, the demonstration was dominated by the union bureaucracy and the political organizations of the pseudo-left, such as Québec Solidaire.

A gulf separates the aims of the workers who have tried to secure union representation at Amazon facilities in Quebec and elsewhere and those of the union bureaucrats, whether the union in question is the CNTU, the Teamsters or the RWDSU. Having imposed one rotten labor contract after another and systematically betrayed workers' struggles for the last forty years, the unions are indifferent to the super-exploitation of Amazon's workers. What frustrates them is Amazon's decision to dispense with their services in controlling and suppressing worker discontent, and negotiating contracts that enshrine multi-tier wages, speed-up and other forms of brutal worker exploitation.

Amazon announced the closure of its Quebec facilities, throwing thousands of workers onto the streets, the same day that the CNTU opted to give up trying to negotiate a first contract in the face of the company's intransigence and instead ask the Quebec Labour Department to name an arbitrator to impose one.

At Saturday's demonstration CNTU President Caroline Senneville focused her fire on Amazon's refusal to abide by the terms of the state-designed, pro-employer collective bargaining system.

Amazon's "anti-union" decision was "aimed first and foremost at preventing the conclusion of a first collective agreement," she thundered. Éric Gingras, president of the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ), explained, for his part, that his presence at the demonstration was "in support of the Quebec way of doing things, labor relations and the recognition of unionism."

In reality, the "collective bargaining" process framed by the Labour Code is the mechanism by which the unions have become integrated ever more fully into corporate management and the capitalist state. This corporatist collusion provides the basis for the numerous lucrative privileges the caste of union bureaucrats enjoy.

The result of the unions' nationalist, pro-capitalist perspective, it goes hand-in-hand with their promotion of an increasingly virulent nationalism that divides Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters in Canada and internationally. It also underlies their more or less explicit support for parties of the capitalist establishment, including the New Democratic Party (NDP) or Trudeau's Liberals and in Quebec, the pro-independence Parti Québécois and Bloc Québécois.

As far as the CSN's direct financial interests are concerned, it's clear that the union sees Amazon's decision to return to its pre-2020 business model—outsourcing delivery to independent, non-unionized workers with no ties to the company—as a lost opportunity. Unionizing a new section of workers would have provided the bureaucrats an additional source of dues and enrichment.

The unions are now urging the federal and Quebec governments to cut their business ties with Amazon, including lucrative cloud computing contracts, while encouraging consumers to individually cancel their "Prime" subscriptions. In response, Quebec Premier François Legault, who earlier described the 4,500 job cuts as a simple "business decision by a private company," declared that "there's nothing I'd like more than to replace Amazon, which often, without realizing it, sells us American products."

But as Senneville herself acknowledged, a consumer boycott will have no real impact on the mega-company: "A few million less in sales for Amazon may not be tons." She added: "But a few million more in sales for Quebec companies can make the difference between a Quebec company surviving, and a Quebec company growing."

In other words, capitalist companies have every right to exploit workers, but they should give the union apparatus a piece of the pie for policing the workforce, and preferably have their head offices in Quebec.

The boycott campaign is entirely in line with the unions' long-standing efforts to tie the working class to the Quebec and Canadian ruling classes, but within the explosive context of the reactionary tariff war between Washington and Ottawa triggered by the Trump White House.

The CSN now says it will turn to the Tribunal administratif du travail (labour court, TAT) to have "the collective dismissal annulled," "warehouses reopened and employees reinstated." But workers must not be fooled: the courts are bourgeois institutions that have time and again ruled in the employers' interests.

Like the whole process of collective bargaining and arbitration, the TAT is framed by labor laws rigged in favour of big business. Even if the TAT finds that the company had violated the province's labor laws, it would, at best, be able to impose a fine that would be but a drop in Amazon's ocean of profits. And in any event, the TAT is powerless to stop business closures.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party intervened at Saturday's demonstration to speak with the workers present and bring them a radically different perspective, based on the independent industrial and political mobilization of the working class. They distributed an SEP statement that declared:

Workers imperatively need fighting organizations to protect themselves from the bosses' attacks, but in turning to the union bureaucracy they will find only disappointment and betrayal...

A turn towards the working class is only possible if workers create new forms of organization: rank-and-file committees, by and for workers, independent of the pro-capitalist union apparatuses. Unless they do so, their struggle will be torpedoed by the CSN.

The primary task of an Amazon workers' rank-and-file committee would be to make contact with Amazon workers around the world, as well as workers in the logistics sector such as postal workers or Purolator workers, in order to wage a real struggle to preserve jobs and working conditions for all.

Such a committee would enjoy the full support of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), backed by the *World Socialist Web Site*, which is fighting for a workers' counter-offensive against austerity and war...

Ultimately, such a mobilization is inseparable from a political struggle against the capitalist system, to break the stranglehold giants like Amazon exercise over society and expropriate the ill-gotten fortunes of Bezos, Elon Musk and co., as part of a profound transformation of the global economy to meet the social needs of all.

Some workers responded positively to this call for class unity and mobilization. Such was the case of Réda, a locked-out employee at the Fairmont Queen Elizabeth hotel, who came to support the sacked Amazon workers.

"We've been locked out for three months, since November," explained Réda. "We've come to support our colleagues at Amazon. We're fighting for the same cause, for the same principles. We're up against a giant, whether it's Amazon, or us, the Fairmont Queen Elizabeth, where the owner is the government-owned Caisse de dépôt."

During the discussion, many issues were discussed, including the second Trump administration, the attack on immigrants and the need to unite the working class. Réda declared: "We need to be united, despite our cultural differences, our social differences, our differences in religious beliefs. We need to wake up, we need to remove the borders [...] If the whole world's population intervenes in the four corners of the globe, whether it's Africa, Europe, North America, Latin America, Asia, the whole world, well, there won't be anyone who can stop us. Maybe we'll start a new era. Maybe we'll get out of capitalism, maybe we'll get out of the politics of repression."



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