

Quebec: A political balance sheet of the United Steelworkers' betrayal of the ABI workers

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After 18 months of struggle and sacrifice, workers at the Alcoa-Rio Tinto-owned *Aluminerie de Bécancour* (ABI) aluminum smelter in Bécancour, Quebec, accepted a concessions-laden contract last month. The rollbacks include pension cuts, increased use of subcontracting, and the elimination of 10 percent of the workforce (see: “Quebec ABI workers’ struggle betrayed by United Steelworkers Union”).

During the 18-month lockout, the more than 1,000 ABI production, skilled trades, and office workers demonstrated great determination and courage. But their struggle was systematically isolated by the United Steelworkers (USW) and the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL), who feared the mobilization of workers in Quebec, across North America and internationally in support of the ABI workers’ anti-concessions struggle would disrupt their cozy, corporatist relations with the employers and big business political establishment.

If the ABI workers are to reverse management’s vicious attacks and defend their jobs, they must draw the political lessons of their bitter experience with the treachery of the USW and QFL. Moreover, the fate of the ABI workers contains crucial lessons for all workers as they confront the joint assault of big business and its political hirelings on their jobs, wages, and social rights.

An international strategy is needed

Workers face an international offensive by big business to make them pay for the crisis of the capitalist profit system through the destruction of their jobs, wages and pensions, and the gutting of public services.

In the case of ABI, aluminum industry analysts made no secret of the fact that one of the main objectives of the lockout was to impose changes in work organization to increase the exploitation of workers in the face of increased competition on the world market. While Alcoa and Rio Tinto locked out their Bécancour employees, they demanded concessions from their employees in Australia and the United States and announced plant closures and job losses in Spain.

To this international assault, workers must counterpose a unified and coordinated response on a global scale. This requires a break with the nationalist, pro-capitalist policy of the trade unions. The unions accept the inviolability of employer property rights—that is big business’ “right” to deploy and dispose of the factories and

smelters built through the collective labour of generations of workers at their will—and, in the name of ensuring the competitiveness of our “own” industries, they are imposing the dictates of the bosses.

Throughout the ABI conflict, the Steelworkers expressed their willingness to accept cuts in jobs and pensions, provided they were “negotiated.” The union bureaucrats were also deeply involved in the elaboration and implementation of the Canadian ruling elite’s protectionist policies. They joined with Justin Trudeau’s Liberal government in urging the Trump administration to remove tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum products and adopt a common North American trade-war policy against China. In pursuing this course, which pits workers against each other in a fratricidal struggle for jobs, the Steelworkers made clear their support for imperialist militarism, with their repeated boasts as to the importance of Canadian-made steel for the production of US warplanes and tanks.

Workers must be mobilized as an independent political force

The ABI workers were not merely engaged in a trade union dispute over a collective agreement, but in a political struggle against the entire class war program of the ruling elite.

This was highlighted by the extraordinary intervention Quebec Premier François Legault, head of the province’s new right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government, made in support of ABI and its concessions drive. Legault repeatedly made statements and tweets condemning the ABI workers’ supposedly “excessive” demands. He also denounced wages across Quebec’s entire manufacturing sector as “too high”—highlighting that his government and the ruling class are engaged in a frontal assault on the working class as a whole.

The ABI workers’ fight against concessions was part of the popular opposition to capitalist austerity that has repeatedly erupted in major struggles in Canada in recent years, such as the student strike that shook Quebec in 2012, the 2017 Quebec construction strike, and last fall’s Canada-wide postal strike. These struggles are part of a growing international working class upsurge, which includes the “Yellow Vest” movement in France, the wildcat strike of *maquiladora* workers in Matamoros, Mexico, mass anti-government demonstrations in Algeria, and teachers’ strikes in the United States, to name but a few examples.

Had ABI workers forcefully appealed to the anti-capitalist sentiment that animates large sections of workers in Canada, the United States and overseas, their struggle could have become the spearhead of a working-class counter-offensive in defense of jobs, pensions, and public services.

But this is the last thing the pro-capitalist trade unions wanted. They did everything they could to isolate the ABI workers. On the basis of their nationalist and pro-capitalist policies, the United Steelworkers and QFL channeled the energy of the rank-and-file ABI workers into futile appeals to the company's shareholders and various representatives of the political establishment—mayors, the region's MPs and MNAs, and even the right-wing CAQ government, thus paving the way for the latter's predictable pro-company intervention.

This strategy led workers straight into a dead end.

To hide the bankruptcy of their policies, the Steelworkers turned to Québec Solidaire (QS), a nationalist party of the upper middle-class that specializes in "left-wing" posturing, while suppressing the class struggle and dividing Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters in English Canada, the US and beyond. Throughout the 18-month struggle, QS provided political cover for the Steelworkers' efforts to isolate the locked-out workers. This included mouthing not a word of criticism of the USW's promotion of protectionism, support for Justin Trudeau's big-business government, or its reactionary appeals to Legault to intervene on the workers' behalf. QS Member of the National Assembly (MNA) Alexandre Leduc, himself a former union official, even gave his blessing to the concessions-filled agreement the ABI workers' reluctantly accepted because they had concluded that under the misleadership of the Steelworkers' bureaucrats nothing better could be won. Leduc hailed it as a partial victory, because it contained "fewer givebacks than the (contract) previously proposed by the employer."

Build rank-and-file committees to mobilize the social power of the working class

In opposition to the rightwing USW and QFL apparatuses and their nationalist strategy, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) urged ABI workers to take their struggle into their own hands by forming a rank-and-file committee and appealing to workers across Canada and internationally for support. From the first days of the lockout, and in some two dozen subsequent articles and statements, we warned that if the struggle remained under the organizational and political control of the USW and the union bureaucracy, it would inevitably be betrayed.

"The Steelworkers continue to isolate the locked-out ABI workers, and, as their March counteroffer shows, they are prepared to impose sweeping concessions," we wrote last April, before going on to warn: "In opposition to the United Steelworkers and the QFL, which are plotting with management and government against them, ABI workers must establish a rank-and-file committee, democratically controlled by the workers themselves, to take the leadership of their struggle in their own hands.

"Only such a rank-and-file committee can break the isolation in which the USW and QFL have straitjacketed the ABI workers'

struggle and spearhead a campaign to reach other sections of the working class—not only in Quebec but in the rest of Canada and internationally" (see: "Quebec Premier backs ABI in extorting massive concessions from locked-out workers").

With the USW's betrayal, the urgency of the fight for this perspective has been fully confirmed. ABI workers must draw the necessary political conclusions from the bitter outcome of their struggle, recognize that in the union bureaucracy they confront a privileged social stratum hostile to their interests and those of the working class as a whole, and take up the fight to build action committees controlled by trusted and militant members of the rank-and-file.

In irreconcilable opposition to the pro-corporate and nationalist policies of the USW and QFL, these committees must fight to rally support for all workers engaged in struggle against concessions and austerity, and fight for the development of an international working-class counter-offensive.

Throughout the lockout, the WSWS insisted that the mobilization of the militant energy of working people must be based on a socialist perspective, that is, the struggle to establish working-class political power, so that socio-economic life can be reorganized to make the satisfaction of human needs, not the further enrichment of the tiny clique of capitalist investors, its animating principle.

Despite the bitter defeat suffered by ABI workers, this perspective acquires renewed urgency under conditions of a resurgence of class struggle on an international scale. In Canada, this has included rising working-class opposition to Doug Ford's far-right government in Ontario—which is increasingly taking the form of a rebellion against the pro-capitalist union apparatus. It is to this powerful social force that ABI workers and their class brothers and sisters across all economic sectors must turn in the coming struggles against concessions, capitalist austerity, and war.

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