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Quebec Premier Demands ABI Workers Make More Concessions

All Out to Defend the Rights and Dignity of ABI Workers!



Locked-out ABI workers in front of National Assembly, March 27, 2019.

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Quebec Premier Demands ABI Workers Make More Concessions

All Out to Defend the Rights and Dignity of ABI Workers!



"Alcoa impoverishes Quebec."

On April 1, Quebec Premier François Legault met separately with representatives of the locked-out ABI workers from Bécancour and Alcoa management, including the President of the Alcoa Business Unit from Pittsburgh. He tweeted after the meetings:

"Meetings with the President of the union at ABI in Bécancour and the President of Alcoa, the main owner of ABI. ABI has been in a labour dispute for 15 months. Management is offering an average salary of \$92,000 per year to 900 employees. The union has to compromise."

Neither the union nor management have ever referred to wages as a point of contention at this time. The main issue is Alcoa's aim to wreck any negotiated norms regarding the pension and working conditions, especially the right of workers to retain unionized work rather than have most work contracted out under the imperialist pragmatic line of flexibility and global competition. Alcoa wants to destroy any organized presence of workers in defence of their rights and of those replacing them upon retirement.

USW Local 9700 President Clément Masse pointed out that the union presented a clear case to the Premier, which made no mention of a wage dispute, nor did the Premier raise with them any issues of wages or compromising with the company. Nonetheless, Premier Legault issued his tweet and publicly declared to the press that the union was not being reasonable and that \$92,000-per-year jobs could be lost.

It is unconscionable for the Premier to attempt to discredit the union's just positions by adopting the provocative methods and dictate for concessions of the foreign oligopoly. It creates an even greater power imbalance between the global oligarchs of Alcoa and the workers, and reinforces the company's dictate rather than creating the possibility of negotiations. It underscores the difficult situation in which ABI workers, the community, Quebec and, more broadly, workers across Canada and worldwide are facing.



The Premier's comments on wages counts on mobilizing workers who get minimum wage to shun the ABI union. This seeks to undermine the mass movement in support of the ABI workers and distort the issues at hand. Legault's nonsense over wages at ABI, which are basically the same wages in place at all other aluminum smelters in Quebec and Canada, is completely out of touch with the

actual conflict and an indication of how his government, in the name of opening of Quebec to business, sides with the oligopolies against the workers.

Neo-liberalism demands all norms be destroyed in the name of flexibility and competition. Alcoa is intent on transforming the conditions under which the company hires, uses and deploys workers, without being limited by legally binding agreements that have been negotiated and approved by the workers. The back-to-work protocol Alcoa tried to dictate to the workers is an example, which they massively rejected in a general membership meeting on March 11. Not only did that protocol officially extend the period over which workers would return to work to 10 months, it allowed the company to suspend or even annul the protocol, if it so desired, based on criteria it could invoke at any time. In other words, no actual back-to-work protocol was presented but rather a company dictate. The conflict would have been declared finished, the workers theoretically called back to work, however in actual fact, they could very well have not been recalled at all, not to mention the fact that during all that time managers and subcontractors would continue working as if no unionized workforce even existed with legal norms and a collective agreement.

Alcoa has achieved such arrangements in the state of Western Australia where the Australian labour relations tribunal (the Fair Work Commission) ruled in favour of Alcoa's demand to terminate the collective agreement of 1,500 workers, under the hoax that it did not provide the company the neo-liberal "flexibility" it required to remain competitive on global markets. Those Alcoa workers have effectively had their union and collective agreement declared legally null and void and are now working under the minimum standards of Australia's labour laws without any organized protection that they control.^[1] Alcoa's dominant position in the global sector allows it to shut down certain operations globally while maintaining supply from other facilities to enforce its dictate, a situation reinforced by neo-liberal governments that serve private interests.

Alcoa's lockout and refusal to enter into negotiations with the ABI workers and their union, and its demands for concessions in working conditions and the role of the union are also being justified in the name of flexibility and competition, which Premier Legault has now publicly endorsed.

Premier's Legault's stand must not pass. It puts the people and resources of Quebec in an untenable position without control and any say on the direction of the economy, which ultimately means all political affairs. It places government and the police powers of the state in the service of the global financial oligarchy in opposition to the rights and well-being of the people.

To go down the road of unrestricted power for the oligopolies and their economic and political dictatorship is not acceptable. Working people, youth and students across Quebec and Canada must intensify their direct financial and other support for the struggle of the ABI workers in defence of their rights and dignity. This struggle and its ultimate outcome have broad implications for all people and the direction of the country.

Note

1. See "The 'Legal' Termination of Collective Agreements -- Australian Example," Pierre Chénier, *Workers' Forum*, February 28, 2019.

(Photos: Chantier politique, Syndicat des Métallos)



Locked-Out Workers' Energy March Declares Forcefully: "The Lockout Is Not a 'Force Majeure'; ABI Must Pay What It Owes!"



Quebec City, March 27, 2019.

Locked-out Bécancour ABI aluminum smelter workers organized an Energy March in Trois-Rivières and Quebec City, on March 26 and 27. The purpose was twofold:

- demand the Legault government do its duty to intervene so that the Alcoa/Rio Tinto cartel ends the lockout in a manner acceptable to the workers;
- demand the energy contract between Alcoa, the government and Hydro-Québec be re-opened so that Alcoa pays in full for its reserved preferential rate energy block.

The workers made it abundantly clear that in no way does the lockout, planned and decreed by the company itself, constitute a "force majeure" or "Act of God," that would free it of its responsibility to pay for its reserved electricity. ABI must pay what it owes Hydro-Québec and the people!

Trois-Rivières -- March 26

Two hundred ABI workers marched two hours to the riding office of Labour Minister Jean Boulet in Trois-Rivières. From there, they marched another two hours through the city's streets. Throughout their action, people warmly greeted them, shook their hands, waved and honked their horns in appreciation of the determined stand of the ABI workers in defence of their rights and the interests of Quebec.

United Steelworkers' Local 9700 President Clément Masse spoke to the workers during the march. He reminded everyone that prior to the Quebec election, Premier François Legault said that Alcoa's demands for concessions and refusal to negotiate a contract acceptable to workers could not be considered serious. If that is so, why has the Premier not acted to enforce the energy contract? The time to act is now.

"The lockout has lasted for so long, over 14 months and counting, because ABI is not fully assuming the economic consequences of its decision. In 2018 alone, Alcoa was able to save \$165 million at the expense of Hydro-Québec and Quebecers. As citizens, it is outrageous to see that our

government is complicit in the lockout," Clément said. As of March 30, 2019, Alcoa owes \$275 million to Hydro-Québec for electricity set aside for it under a long-term contract giving the company preferential hydro rates.





Quebec City -- March 27

Hundreds of workers from Quebec City, the Beauce region, Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean and from as far away as Fermont on the North Shore were waiting at Quebec's National Assembly on March 27, to greet with affection the arriving delegation of 300 ABI workers.



Present amongst the assembled workers were members and representatives of many unions including the United Steelworkers, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, the Teamsters, and the Canadian Union of Public Employees. Retirees from Arcelor Mittal in Contrecoeur were also in attendance, as were students from Laval University, who announced a donation of \$600 for ABI workers.

Several speakers addressed the crowd. Clément Masse said that Premier Legault in comments to the press dismissed the energy contract and its "force majeure" clause allowing Alcoa to evade its social responsibility to pay what it owes to Hydro-Québec as "kids' stuff."

Someone pointed out that the amount in arrears to Hydro-Québec is now \$275 million, which can hardly be termed "kids' stuff."

Clément said the Premier must do his duty, "show leadership, modify the clause and re-balance the power between ourselves and our employer." The fact that Alcoa is not paying for its electricity block explains in part why it is able to take such a hard line and demand sweeping anti-labour, anti-union concessions and systematically refuse to negotiate an end to the lockout, he added.



During the actions it was announced that Premier Legault would meet with the union and company representatives on Monday, April 1. Before the meeting even took place however, the Premier in a most boorish manner stated his anti-worker position. He told the media that he expects the union to make further concessions and that he will not touch the energy contract. These statements are totally unacceptable and reveal the government not as representative of Quebec working people but of foreign private interests out to enrich themselves at the expense of Quebec workers and the nation's natural resources.

Many point out that even though the energy contract is a one-sided dictate giving monopolies such as Alcoa and other big industrial cartels electricity at a price below the price of production, the contract in question states that a lockout is a "force majeure" releasing Alcoa from paying for the electricity only if the interruption in production is an "unforeseeable, irresistible event beyond the control of a Party that delays, interrupts or impedes the performance, in whole or in part, by that Party of its obligations under the Contract." This lockout is the doing of the company and its continuation is the doing of the company.

The ABI lockout was planned from A to Z to attack the workers, the community and the union. The lockout was completely foreseeable and is completely under the control of Alcoa, which is using it to extort anti-worker concessions that are unacceptable in this modern age.

***The Lockout Is not a Force Majeure; ABI Must Pay What It Owes!
End the ABI Lockout Now on Terms Acceptable to the Workers!***

(Photos: Chantier politique, Syndicat des Métallos)



Union Submits Counter-Offer to Alcoa/Rio Tinto Cartel



Energy March, Trois-Rivières, March 26, 2019.

The Alcoa/Rio Tinto cartel has now locked out around 1,000 workers represented by the United Steelworkers Local 9700 from their Bécancour aluminum smelter for more than 14 months. On March 21, Local 9700 submitted a full counter-offer for a collective agreement to the Alcoa/Rio Tinto cartel to end the lockout. The counter-offer in the opinion of the union includes significant compromises while preserving the union's essential demands.

The two main compromises relate to the pension plan and cuts to unionized positions through attrition. In its counter-offer the union accepts the cartel's request for the elimination of the existing defined-benefit pension plan and its replacement by a member-funded pension plan with defined benefits. The essential difference between the two plans, according to the union, is that while the workers' pension benefits remain defined in the new plan, the employer's contribution is fixed and the risks related to the funding of the plan are borne by the workers.

The other concession is the acceptance of the reduction by attrition of 103 unionized positions. This represents about one-tenth of the total unionized workforce of the company. The union reported earlier that the demand for reduction in positions made by the cartel in July 2018 was on the order of 20 per cent of the unionized workforce. In its press release announcing the counter-offer,



the union says that it maintains its demand for seniority in filling job postings and labour mobility within the plant.

The union is presenting this counter-offer with the aim of bringing the employer to the bargaining table to end the lockout by negotiating a collective agreement that the workers will find acceptable within the circumstances. The workers are in a very difficult situation because the owners' cartel has refused to negotiate since the start of the lockout and even long before that. There have been no negotiations between the two parties since the beginning, just a unilateral dictate by ABI management. The union reported that during a conciliation session on April 3, ABI did not even see fit to respond to the union's counter-offer and refused to hold negotiations with the union. The necessity remains to pressure those in control to abandon their anti-negotiation dictate, discuss and sign this counter-offer at the bargaining table and end the lockout. Submission to enslaving demands of the foreign oligarchs is not an option.



Interprofessional Health Care Federation of Quebec (FIQ) joins locked-out ABI workers on their picketline to express their solidarity, April 3, 2019.

This makes it all the more important for workers in Quebec and elsewhere to step up their support for the locked-out ABI workers. Workers throughout Quebec and Canada and their allies amongst the youth and other strata must forcefully express the broad public demand that ABI management give up its dictate and negotiate a collective agreement that is acceptable to the Bécancour workers. It requires a concerted effort by all to send a clear message that the cartel's anti-negotiation dictate to smash the organized defence of the workers in the form of Local 9700 so as to destroy the existing terms of employment will not pass!

(Photos: Syndicat des Métallos, FIQ)



Resolute Actions Against Untenable Conditions in Health Care

Quebec Nurses' "No Mandatory Overtime"

Day of Action on April 8

On April 8, nurses belonging to the Interprofessional Health Care Federation of Quebec (FIQ) will be holding a No Mandatory Overtime Day of Action, under the theme "Mandatory Overtime Has

Gone On Long Enough." At a press conference in Montreal on April 2, FIQ President Nancy Bédard presented the action's aim: "On April 8, health care professionals want to opt for their own physical and mental health, their personal and family lives. Just like the vast majority of the population, they want a normal work day, without risk being taken hostage. That's the goal behind this unprecedented day [of action]," she noted.



Protest against poor working conditions including mandatory overtime, March 28, 2019 outside health care human resources offices in Laurentides.

The FIQ President described the systematic use of mandatory overtime as a form of organizational violence against nurses.

"This practice has become an actual mode of management that undermines the rights of health care professionals and has a direct impact on the quality and safety of care. April 8 should be a jolt to all managers in the network. When mandatory overtime is 'planned' in advance, it is no longer an emergency. The code of conduct requires that overtime must be used as an exceptional and emergency measure, and this is not currently the case. What should be an exceptional measure has been established in many institutions as the current management system. It is inhuman and dangerous for both health care professionals and patients," she said.



According to the FIQ, the practice of mandatory overtime goes far beyond the issue of labour relations. It undermines the safety of care and has a direct impact on patients. Women are the first victims of mandatory overtime since they represent 90 per cent of the members of the federation. Thousands of mothers, spouses and caregivers find themselves forced to work extra shifts. Their profession is one where this inhuman practice is rampant, and this, on a daily basis.

In a brief presented to the Quebec government in May 2018, the FIQ states that in 2014-2015, Quebec nurses worked 4.5 million overtime hours. Burnout among workers in the health system has reached an unprecedented level. There is currently an explosion in the number of disabilities for psychological diagnoses among workers in the health network, including a 47 per cent increase at the Integrated Health and Social Services Centre (CISSS) in the Estrie; 35 per cent at the McGill University Health Centre; and 31 per cent at the CISSS in Montérégie-Est. According to the FIQ, overtime hours have a significant impact on the number of errors committed and the systematic use

of overtime significantly increases the risk of mortality in hospitals, citing a four per cent increase in incidents and accidents during the delivery of health care in Quebec facilities in 2016-2017.

One of the aims of the day is to make an urgent appeal to the Minister of Health and Social Services to go beyond declarations and take concrete action to end the mandatory overtime.

"However, this wish will remain unfulfilled if managers are not required to make profound changes," said Nancy Bédard. "A clear message must be sent that the days are over when we put the whole functioning of the health network on the shoulders of health care professionals. It is urgent to act! We shared with the Minister a multitude of solutions including the deployment of health care professional-to-patient ratios through legislation. We hope there is going to be a [marked difference] before and after April 8, 2019. We are hopeful that this day will be one of significant change. If not, we will continue our struggle and the next few months could be quite intense," concluded the FIQ President.

The FIQ represents close to 76,000 nurses, practical nurses, respiratory therapists and clinical perfusionists working in health care facilities throughout Quebec.

(Photos: FIQ)



Nova Scotians Demand a Modern Health Care System Fit for Human Beings



The Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NSGEU) organized a "Rally to Raise the ALARM that Health Care for All Nova Scotians is in Crisis." Prior to the rally at the Nova Scotia Legislature on April 3, Workers' Forum interviewed NSGEU President Jason MacLean on the aim of the action.

Workers' Forum: What is the aim of the rally that you are holding on April 3?

Jason MacLean: We have organized the rally to raise the alarm about the state of health care. Our membership is demanding more advocacy happen and demanding that we be heard at the Legislature. The McNeil government tabled its budget on March 26 and we were hoping that there was going to be more funding in it to support our frontline health care workers and social workers. The budget is a huge disappointment, with truly not much new money for health care and nothing for primary care, nothing to handle the problems in home care, in long-term care and in the emergency departments in hospitals.

Ultimately, we have issues throughout the health care system. It starts at the emergency department where we have an over abundance of people coming there, both because more people are in poorer health today and, as well, many people do not have family doctors and that is why they are going to emergency departments. This is overwhelming the emergency departments and people are being moved around to other parts of the building so we have "hallway medicine."

Then, we have a shortage of health care professionals including nurses, and on top of that we have an employer that began to interpret overtime provisions differently in the last round of bargaining. They are not paying people overtime at the same time as the system is dependent on overtime hours. There are people working overtime constantly, but now they are only getting paid straight time because they may have had a day off earlier in the pay period.

People are deterred from work; they do not want to work because they do not feel valued at work, and on top of that they are burnt out. Also, the severity level of patients is so high that more people are being admitted to hospital. There have not been any new beds in long-term care so people cannot be moved into long-term care so they are occupying beds in hospitals as well.

When people are sent home with home care there are not enough Continuing Care Assistants (CCA); there are not enough home care workers to be able to handle the load. Every agency is being told that they cannot have a wait list but still people cannot get services they need in time because there are not enough CCAs. Also, the way the hours are organized, and the rate of pay, people tend to want to work in an acute care setting or long-term care setting as opposed to traveling across the city to people's homes to provide care.

We have a patient flow problem; we have too many patients and nowhere to put them and nobody to care for them because the people that care for them are being nickel and dimed by the government and the employer. The health employer, the Nova Scotia Health Authority (NSHA) is a colossal failure that Premier McNeil created when he came into power. In this Health Authority, one hand does not know what the other hand is doing. The Health Authority is more worried about the bottom line than patient care or the well-being of their staff.

WF: What are your demands?

JM: We want to work with the government. I have asked the Minister of Health to come to the Emergency Department and shadow health care professionals in any emergency department for a day or go on a unit and shadow a nurse for a day and see what goes on there. He is trying to deal with the offloading issues that we have at hospitals where the paramedics are stuck at hospitals waiting for a patient that they have brought in to be taken in instead of being in the community picking up people. People are waiting up to 6 to 12 hours to get an ambulance. So far he has not responded. He has not gone to an Emergency Department to see what goes on.

We are saying that we need more health care professionals, we need more nurses, we need more CCAs, we need more long-term care beds. We need a lot of attention brought to the health care

system in general, but you will never be able to fix any type of backlog without people. We need more doctors as well. The professionals themselves and the system has been starved for so long, it is almost like they are purposely trying to do it to make our province's health care system ripe for privatization.

I know there are issues. I know that the government knows there are issues, but they do not acknowledge the issues. They have never acknowledged that there is a crisis in health care. You cannot talk to a doctor, a nurse, a health care professional, anybody that works in a hospital, without them telling you that this system is in crisis. That is why we are holding a two-hour rally in front of the Legislature and we are bringing attention to the crisis in health care.



(Photos: NSGEU, NSFL)



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