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Lockout Lifted at ABI Smelter in Bécancour, Quebec

ABI Workers Return to Work with Their Heads High



General membership meeting of workers at the ABI smelter in Bécancour, July 2, 2019. (*Metallos*)

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ABI Workers Return to Work with Their Heads High



ABI workers in Bécancour, Quebec are returning to work after they agreed to a new collective agreement. During the unjust 18-month lockout, the aluminum smelter workers through their determined resistance in defence of their rights made a valuable contribution to the dignity of all workers across Quebec and Canada. Their collective actions exposed those in control of the Alcoa/Rio Tinto cartel as modern day robber barons who abscond with increasing amounts of the social wealth ABI workers produce at their smelter, along with Quebec's electricity.

The courageous struggle of the ABI workers revealed the disgraceful role of the Quebec government as an ally and representative of the global oligarchs in opposition to the collective interests of the Quebec people and their natural resources. The Quebec government constantly distorted and attacked the just struggle of the ABI workers and allowed the global cartel to renege on its electricity contract with Hydro-Québec. These shameful actions encouraged the Alcoa cartel to refuse to negotiate with the workers and prolong the conflict. Working people are determined to hold the Quebec government to account for its anti-worker actions on behalf of the international financial oligarchy.

Workers' Forum hails the courageous struggle of the ABI workers, their union and leadership, in defending the dignity of labour, and the collective interests of the community and society. They accepted a most difficult task in this fight with the Alcoa/Rio Tinto global cartel, and the quisling governments at its disposal. The workers faced a refusal of the cartel to negotiate and instead it dictated concessionary terms to serve their narrow interests of increased profits at the expense of the working people. They defended the need for equilibrium in relations of production based on workers' rights, including the right to negotiate collectively the terms of employment, which the workers themselves must deem acceptable, rather than have those terms imposed on them through



dictate.

At this historical juncture the labour relations regime of the past no longer exists. The ABI contract was not achieved through negotiations at the bargaining table but as a result of the workers' united firm resistance to the impunity of those in control of their workplace. They recognized that in the conditions of today, monopolies will not negotiate in good faith. Those in control believe they can simply dictate concessionary terms and destroy unions, collective agreements and pension regimes at their whim by declaring that workers are a cost of production and if they want to keep their jobs they must agree to whatever the employers declare is necessary. The ABI workers stood as an example for other contingents of workers across the country who are putting up serious resistance to this new regime the employers seek to impose.

These employers are acting with the state in their pockets, not only in terms of governments and their ministries of labour but more and more also the labour boards and courts long said to be neutral and above taking sides in disputes between the working class and those in control of the workplaces and social wealth. Thus, the ABI workers' resistance was not only to the employers' unacceptable dictate but to the role of the state itself. This makes their struggle primarily political, as well as economic. It reveals that the fight for people's empowerment is at the centre of the battles for justice today and that the workers recognize this and are rising to the occasion to lead this fight.

In this regard, the courageous resistance of the ABI smelter workers was waged using non-traditional methods of support from the entire labour movement in Quebec as well as other places across Canada and even internationally. It was waged in the court of public opinion where the workers stood as one in defence of their just cause. They showed to the entire world that the Quebec government's electricity agreement with Rio Tinto/Alcoa and the reneging on it during the lockout based on an unconscionable definition of "force majeure" is utterly self-serving and a fraud and that the aims of the company in Quebec, as in Australia, are beyond the pale.

The methods of the ABI local to wage the fight against the company achieved the results the workers were seeking. The company's final version of yet another "final offer" it refused to negotiate was thus a retraction of many of the unacceptable concessionary demands the company was making and was deemed acceptable by a majority of workers.



The ABI struggle shows that no force can act in the old way because the conditions of the past no longer exist. Today, the monopolies and global cartels do everything to deprive the workers of what belongs to them by right. They have governments in their pockets as well as state agencies and the courts. Workers are not impressed with this mighty force arrayed against them. The tactics used by the workers today are directed at depriving the monopolies of their ability to do as they please. All over the country and even the world, workers are rising to fight in a new way to defend what belongs to them by right and in this way defend the rights of all and open a

path for society's progress.

The ABI workers stand second to none. They have done themselves, their families and their Quebec nation proud, as well as the entire Canadian working class. Bravo to them and to the union leadership that did not flinch but led them every step of the way through thick and thin!

We wish the ABI workers success as they return to work, united behind their union in the conditions they face where the company will continue trying to impose its dictate using the state institutions to achieve its self-serving aims.

The struggle of the ABI workers against this unjust lockout to impose a concessionary contract has been a valuable contribution in the defence of the rights and dignity of workers throughout Quebec, Canada and the world. *Workers' Forum* salutes the ABI workers for having waged an audacious struggle not only for themselves but for all working people and their communities.

(Photos: WF, Metallos)



Workers' Resistance an Invaluable Asset of the Working Class Movement for Its Rights and Dignity



One of many solidarity rallies on the ABI picket lines, March 23, 2018.

During the 18-month lockout, ABI workers and their union were tireless in mobilizing the organized support of workers in Quebec, Canada and several other countries. They made an immense effort to counter the power of the Alcoa/Rio Tinto global cartel and its political representatives in government. The global cartels have access to massive social wealth and production facilities throughout the world, which they brandish as weapons against the international working class to attack their rights and dignity and extract concessions on their working conditions and standard of living.

Building on the tradition established by the struggle of Alma aluminum workers during the Rio Tinto lockout in 2012, the ABI workers and their union mobilized support, including financial support, from approximately 500 union locals in Quebec, Canada, and elsewhere including the United States, Australia and Guatemala. In many cases this was done through holding general membership meetings at which workers were informed of the ABI dispute and subsequently voted to support the workers financially, often in regular donations until the end of the lockout.



Rio Tinto Alma workers at May 25, 2019 rally supporting ABI workers.

Union-trained representatives journeyed to address workers throughout the world, including Australia and Belgium to explain the conflict and mobilize support. Workers and unions from across Quebec, and from many places in Canada, the United States and other countries, came to the ABI workers' picket lines to express their support. This greatly encouraged the ABI workers to hold firm during the lockout despite the difficulties. The

many activities engaged in during the lockout and the relations that developed with other workers are a valuable asset of the workers' movement, which can be further developed and made even more effective in the fight in defence of workers' rights.

The global social love and solidarity of the working class was on full display at the powerful family march of over 5,000 people demonstrating their enormous spirit of resistance and dignity in the streets of downtown Trois-Rivières on May 25. The struggle of the ABI workers and their community and global solidarity throughout the lockout reveal the enormous potential of the working class to defend itself.

The resistance of the ABI workers and the support of their allies throughout the world exposed the subservience to global private interests of neo-liberal governments such as in Quebec in opposition to working people and their communities. The lockout shows the necessity to hold those governments to account and confront them with the practical politics of the working class in new ways that have to be explored and developed.



Board at picket line thanks all those who supported the ABI workers. Shown above, delegation of Unifor Local 1980 workers from Markham, Ontario, visiting the picket line June 17, 2019.

(Photos: WF, Metallos)



Shameful Anti-Worker Actions of the Quebec Government



By publicly taking stands in favour of the Alcoa/Rio Tinto cartel during the 18-month unjust lockout of ABI smelter workers, the Quebec government covered itself with shame. The government considered it more important to serve the global cartel than to defend Quebec workers and their communities and society. The government could have intervened at any time to establish equilibrium in the relations between the unionized workers and the global cartel, one that respects the workers' rights and the well-being and rights of all in Quebec. Instead, the government allowed the global cartel to unleash the full power of its social wealth and international productive and distribution capacity to attack the workers with its refusal to negotiate, arrogant final offers and threats to close the smelter.

The Quebec government distorted the issues in the conflict making wages a point of contention, which they were not, while covering up the anti-worker concessionary demands of the cartel that would lower the standard of living and working in Quebec. The government used its power of control over the media to publicly denounce the workers' resistance as unreasonable and put pressure on them to accept Alcoa's concessionary demands.

The Quebec government authorized Alcoa's self-serving misappropriation of \$400 million from Hydro-Québec. The government declared that the lockout was a *force majeure*, an "unforeseeable, irresistible event beyond the control of a Party," which was Alcoa in this case of the unjust lockout. On the contrary, the lockout was premeditated and planned as a weapon to force workers to accept concessions. The government agreement with the lockout as a *force majeure*, as something not planned and controlled by the cartel, released the company from its obligation to pay for the block of energy reserved for it at preferential rates.

Everyone knew that the lockout was not "unforeseeable, irresistible" or beyond Alcoa's control. It was a planned and consciously executed move by the global cartel to attack the Quebec working class. The actions and in this case inaction of the Quebec government directly contributed to the launching and continuation of the lockout for 18 months. This so-called nationalist government helped to impose an unjust lockout by a foreign cartel on its own workers, and made Quebecers pay for the lockout through an enormous loss of revenue for Hydro-Québec.

The resistance of the ABI workers and the support of their allies have put the shameful activity of the Quebec government up for discussion to find ways to hold it to account and counterattack its anti-worker anti-social politics. The actions of the Quebec government expose the real nature of its call to make Quebec "open for business" as one that serves the rich global oligarchs in their drive to transfer yet more social wealth out of Quebec in an unjust atmosphere of disequilibrium.



(Photos: WF, Metallos)



New Collective Agreement Ratified

A general membership meeting on July 2, attended by about 800 workers of the just over 900 still employed at the ABI smelter in Bécancour voted by a 79.8 per cent majority to ratify the latest

contract offer of the Alcoa/Rio Tinto cartel. This put a formal end to the unjust 18-month lockout and blackmail of the cartel. Right to the end the cartel, and its nefarious partner in crime the Quebec government, refused to negotiate with the workers and instead flaunted yet another "final offer." This final offer came with the widely publicized threat that if workers rejected the contract then the smelter would be immediately closed for good.

Eighty-five percent of the workers will be recalled to work by January 1, 2020, and all workers will be recalled by April 1, 2020.

The workers were able to fend off some of the anti-worker concessions that the owners demanded in earlier final offers. For example, the back-to-work protocol is superior to what workers previously refused to accept last March 4. The agreed-to protocol provides for a fixed return to work period of six to eight months rather than the open-ended return of the rejected protocol, which the company could have extended or even eliminated at will. After five months, all workers not yet back to work will receive \$635 per week from the company, non-refundable, until they are back on the job.

The company withdrew its concessionary demands on workers' seniority rights. The employer will not be able to offer positions to people outside the plant without first offering them to union members.

The number of jobs that can be outsourced is reduced compared to what was contained in the March 4 offer.

This also decreases the number of unionized positions that can be eliminated during the term of the new collective agreement.

The company softened its concessionary demand to reduce employer-paid union leave.

ABI management commits to an additional \$8 million contribution to the new pension plan. The defined-benefit pension plan is being replaced by a member-funded pension plan, which is now in effect in several other aluminum smelters in Quebec. The workers manage the indexed plan and carry the risks of possible falling benefits. The company's initial request in 2018 was to impose a two-tier pension plan, keeping the current employees on their defined-benefit plan and placing future hires on a much inferior defined-contribution plan.

The company is withdrawing its \$19 million grievance over damage alleged to have been caused by the workers in the plant during negotiations in 2017. The grievance, based on a total lie, was a clumsy attempt to intimidate the workers and their union and to justify the complete restructuring of the smelter. The so-called sabotage was never raised by the company during the time it was alleged to have happened.

The six-year contract contains cumulative wage increases totalling 15.3 per cent.

The relentless resistance of the workers and their union executive with the support of other workers and the community throughout the 18-month lockout resulted in the removal of certain concessions. Workers and their community are well aware of the damages the remaining concessions will do in lowering working standards at the smelter and putting downward pressure on the standard of living throughout the region. The global cartels of oligarchs that control the socialized economy and their representatives in government are using the immense social wealth they already control and the political power of neo-liberal governments to transfer more and more social value from production away from workers and their communities and into the coffers of the rich. The increasing transfer of produced social wealth from workers to the oligarchs assisted by their political flunkies is a problem the working class is taking up for solution.



Growing Opposition to the Anti-Social Offensive in Alberta

Workers Express a Resounding No! to Bill 9 and the Dictate of the Kenney Government

- Peggy Askin -



Picket organized by AUPE Local 95, July 3, 2019, at Foothills Hospital in Calgary.

Information pickets continue to be organized across Alberta to oppose anti-worker Bill 9, the *Public Sector Wage Arbitration Deferral Act*. Public sector workers demand the government adhere to the provisions in their legally negotiated collective agreements covering 180,000 union members. The contracts required arbitration on a wage-re-opener to take place by June 30. In contravention with the signed agreements negotiated in good faith with public sector unions and without the consent of the workers involved, the government has arbitrarily denied the arbitration to occur by the scheduled date.

Workers expressed their militant stand in defence of their rights in a massive turnout of more than 1,000 workers at an information picket organized by Local 95, Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE). Held during lunch hour on July 3 at Foothills Hospital in Calgary, hospital workers represented by AUPE, the United Nurses of Alberta and the Health Sciences Association of Alberta came together on the picket line. Active and retired workers from other sectors also enthusiastically joined in. Together they expressed their stand through chants and messages on their placards: Yes to Good Faith Negotiations! No to Dictate! Defend our Public Services! As one united force of the working class they declared that an attack on the right of public sector workers to a say on their wages and conditions of work is an attack on all workers and the social conditions of all Albertans. The Kenney government's dictate against workers and the social conditions of all is not acceptable and the people do not consent.





Calgary, July 3, 2019

Members of Local 95 worked long and hard to organize the picket and mobilize support to guarantee a successful turnout and a resounding success it was. AUPE organized buses to bring workers from hospitals all across the city to the picket. Many workers facing difficulty arranging time off from work showed determination to join the picket. Hundreds of workers emerged out of Foothills Hospital on their lunch hour to join their voices with others in defence of their rights. Local 95 distributed pizza to ensure no one missed their lunch. The streets outside Foothills Hospital rang out with chants against Bill 9, for workers rights and for the rights of all to health care and other social programs.

Successful pickets were also held in Tofield on June 28, Lamont on July 2, and Leduc Hospital on July 9, as well as in numerous other cities and towns.



Picket at Le Duc hospital, July 9, 2019.

During the picket at Foothills Hospital, Guy Smith AUPE President led off the speeches saying in part, "We have been disrespected by the government of Alberta. You have had your legal rights taken away by the power of a government that thinks it can use the power of the state to crush workers. We are here to tell them you will never crush the will of the people; you will never crush the strength of workers in solidarity. You cannot use the legislative power of the state to take away collective bargaining agreements that are negotiated in good faith and legally binding. Do we really want to see an Alberta where the government can just rip up the deal?"

Smith's question was met with a resounding *No!*

"In Alberta a deal is a deal, and any government that tries to rip that out of our hands, we will have to take action and we are doing it today folks. We are not the only ones holding pickets. They are taking place across the province. This is just the beginning. When we leave today, go back to your worksites and talk to your fellow workers, tell them we all need to stand together in solidarity against this aggressive bully of a government."

Sandra Azocar, Executive Director of Friends of Medicare, and a former Vice-President of AUPE said, "The reason we are here is because we believe that your conditions of work are care conditions. If you are not resourced, if you are not staffed, if you are not given the opportunity to do the work that you do on behalf of Albertans day in and day out, then it doesn't work for every single one of us. [...]

We will stand by you until this violation of your rights is fixed. This government has the responsibility to provide care. I have not seen this much energy since 2012 when the hospitals were surrounded by workers because you had been told that you were a dime a dozen. We showed them back then that dime-a-dozen people can shut down hospitals. This government needs to be told very clearly that they need to arbitrate, that they need to negotiate at the table, and not legislate. Thank you so much for standing up for Albertans. Thank you so much for standing up for public health and public services and I promise that we will be behind you all the way."

Karen Craik, Provincial Secretary Treasurer of the United Nurses of Alberta said, "Rights belong to all Albertans, not just the rich corporate Albertans. The government has said that they are going to wait for the Blue Ribbon Panel to come out to determine what our wages are worth. We provide care to all Albertans. Even teachers are affected by this legislation. It is all public sector workers, that are under attack here and the government says it is just a slight delay because they need to know what our finances are. But they did not stop cutting the taxes for huge corporations and did not have to wait for the Blue Ribbon Panel results to come in before they made that decision. So they are giving a tax cut to corporations and cutting us. Albertans should not stand for that because every Albertan who gets cut in the public sector means a cut to the services for the average Albertan. I just want to say, Jason Kenney, we are all Albertans, you cannot cut public services because you will cut the care for all Albertans."

Laurel Jackson, a provincial executive member of the Health Sciences Association of Alberta, congratulated AUPE for organizing the picket and said she was overwhelmed by the turnout. Speaking of the Klein government years, she stated with great conviction, "I lived through the 1990s and I will not do that again."





Bonnie Gostola, an AUPE Vice-President from the health care sector thanked all the unions for joining together and for "making sure that our voices are heard and that they matter. Everybody's voice matters here. We are glad and proud of all our members that came out today in support and solidarity for everything that we do every day for Albertans. It doesn't matter if you are a nurse or a teacher, an electrician or a plumber, when you provide a service to Albertans, we matter. When our collective bargaining rights are threatened, we are all under threat, and Albertans are all under threat. That is unacceptable. They are going after our fundamental, constitutional right to bargain in good faith, and this is the time that we need to fight back and show this government that everything we do, every public service is important to every Albertan."

David Choy, Chair of AUPE Local 95, gave heartfelt thanks to everyone who came out to join together to make the picket such a success saying, "We have sent a clear message today, we have shown that we are paying attention, that we can organize; but the government needs to hold up their end of the bargain."

"We need to be asking ourselves, what is next? We need to be prepared to protect our collective bargaining rights. Please inform everyone of what you have seen; visit the AUPE website; use any of the social media platforms available; by standing side by side we cause them to take notice, to pause and think twice. Solidarity forever everybody."

After the speeches, the picket continued for well over an hour, growing in numbers as workers from every department of the hospital joined their fellow health care workers from across the city in demonstrating their determined *No!* to Bill 9 and all government attacks on workers' rights and the social conditions of the people.



Tofield, June 28, 2019.



Vegreville, June 27, 2019.

(Photos: WF, AUPE, R. Domeij)



Forestry Industry in British Columbia

Workers on Strike to Defend Their Rights



Picket at Duke Point in Nanaimo on Vancouver Island, July 3, 2019. (USW Local 1-1937)

Forestry workers on the BC coast and Vancouver Island took strike action on July 1 against Western Forest Products and its subcontractors. About 3,000 workers are involved, approximately half of them directly employed by Western Forest Products and half by subcontractors. In strike votes conducted in June, union members of USW Local 1-1937 voted 98.8 per cent in favour of strike action to back up their demands for improved wages and working conditions and in rejection of the employers' attempt to impose concessions.

In the June 28 bargaining update, USW Local 1-1937 writes, "This action was not taken lightly and was strategically made in order to apply maximum pressure on WFP, in order to send the strongest possible message, in the clearest possible terms, that WFP must seriously address the membership's proposals, remove all of their concessions entirely, as well as rescind all of the cancellation letters regarding local agreements and practices."

Brian Butler, the President of Local 1-1937, in speaking to a Vancouver Island television station said, "They have massive concessions where they're attacking our pensions. [...] They're attacking our benefit plans, they are attacking our job security and they've wiped out decades worth of local agreements that our members have negotiated over the years, and none of that will stand."

Forestry workers are facing the same brutality as workers in other sectors in which companies, instead of negotiating to renew collective agreements on the basis of established norms and standards, are trampling on already negotiated terms and declaring them no longer in force, while at the same time demanding workers make concessions and give up what has been negotiated in the past.

The BC Federation of Labour (BCFED) in a press release on July 10, issued, "a 'hot edict' today on Western Forest Products (WFP) in a show of solidarity with striking forest workers. The move, welcomed by the United Steelworkers (USW), means that members of the BCFED's affiliated unions have been asked to no longer handle any WFP coastal lumber, log and wood products."

Coastal forestry workers are defending their rights and their dignity as those who transform into use-value the natural resources of the forest through their work. Their demand that Western Forest Products negotiate and drop all their demands for concessions is just and deserves everyone's support.



Note to Readers

Workers' Forum will resume publication in time for Labour Day, September 2. Until then it will publish news, stories and commentaries from time to time to deal with unfolding events. Please continue to send us your reports, photos and views, and keep up to date with the CPC(M-L) website and calendars of events for important announcements. Readers are also encouraged to support the work of the Workers' Centre of CPC(M-L) by continuing the work to sign up subscribers and new readers and by making a financial contribution.

Have a great summer! All out to support all workers fighting for their rights and the rights of all!

Workers' Forum Editorial and Technical Staff



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