







The monopoly media are now talking about banning all strikes in slaughterhouses or severely restricting them by declaring them an essential service. When a television host asked Minister of Labour Jean Boulet of Quebec's Coalition Avenir government if it was possible to declare slaughterhouses an essential service, he said that the idea was worth discussing, but current labour law in Quebec does not allow it. The category of essential services in labour law applies only to public services, he said. He added that companies can, however, argue to the Administrative Labour Tribunal that their services are akin to essential services and request a court decision to restrict the strike. Of course, governments have a long history of passing special back-to-work legislation against private sector workers in construction, air and rail transportation and other sectors, and so passing back-to-work legislation against these workers is always possible.

Olymel and Exceldor workers went on strike because the conditions in the industry imposed by the private monopolies are untenable. A new direction is needed to achieve a new equilibrium for the workers themselves and the agricultural producers.

### **Anti-Labour Restructuring of the Industry in the Early 2000s**

It should be remembered that the workers at these two plants have suffered wage reductions of nearly 20 per cent over the last several years. Olymel workers were the victims of major reorganizations by the company in the early 2000s.

In 2006, Olymel went after the Vallée Jonction workers with the help of the government and former Premier Lucien Bouchard, who acted as mediator. Olymel had carried out a major restructuring of its operations, closing several plants and demanding concessions from the workers. It concentrated its greatest efforts at its largest plant, the one in Vallée-Jonction, where workers' resistance to concessions was the strongest. By defeating the workers at Vallée-Jonction that year, it was able to continue its anti-worker activities in the years that followed, up to the present. This has allowed it to run the show in the agri-food industry in Quebec and to some extent in Canada. It has grown rapidly through the acquisition of companies operating in the same field at a cost of several billion dollars, including -- to name but one -- Agromex and its agricultural facilities, for which it paid more than \$2 billion. These acquisitions have made Olymel one of the largest agri-food companies in Canada and a relatively major player in North America, with the acquisition of companies in Ontario, Alberta and Saskatchewan. The "Quebec model," which was imposed by Olymel, inspired many similar companies to establish the same pattern. Exceldor is one of them.

The main characteristics of the "Quebec model" are:

1. Tight control of workers' wages in the regions, either through concessions or through very low wage increases.
2. The use of cheap immigrant labour recruited by agencies in the big cities and bused directly to the factories in the morning and evening and even for night shifts.
3. The use of the temporary foreign worker program through international agencies, some of which are owned by these companies.
4. Obtaining government subsidies, such as the recent \$150 million grant from the Quebec government to keep Olymel's head office in Quebec.
5. The development of vertical control of the production chain, from breeding to the finished product and through to the sale of the products on the national and international markets.

This "Quebec model" is nothing more than a copy and paste of what exists in the United States and has nothing to do with developing the national economy, let alone a nation-building project.

Big agribusiness, taking advantage of this system, has *de facto* created several categories of workers in order to further exploit them and expropriate more of the new value they create. The demand of Canadian workers is to guarantee the rights of all workers, no matter where they come from or how the monopolies recruit them.

The struggle of the workers in these two plants is a struggle for life, for the life of their region and their community, for their livelihood and for their right to be. It is a categorical stand against the "Quebec model" of exploitation of workers which divides the workers and violates their rights, and it is also a call for working class unity to defend their lives.



Food processing workers were among the first victims of COVID-19 due to the working conditions in the slaughterhouses and meatpacking plants. From the beginning they fought for their right to safety and together they learned to organize. Now, the claim by the monopolies that agri-food workers are essential, a claim that was used during the pandemic to insist on continued production, is being used to justify the violation of the rights of the workers, including the right to strike.

Calls to legislate workers back to work, supposedly to avoid food waste or food shortages, are unacceptable. Workers are defending their rights and fighting for an industry organized to meet the needs of the people and not the narrow private interests of a global empire.

Pork and poultry producers who supply the animals for the slaughterhouses must join with industrial workers to bring an end to the control of the industry by the oligopolies who rely on ever-increasing exploitation of the workers. This includes through human trafficking, which is part of the arrangements that exist today in all agricultural sectors. Producers must add their voices to the demand for a guarantee of food self-sufficiency and a system that guarantees the rights of all throughout the entire agri-food industry.

This neo-liberal imperialist system is totally bankrupt and inhuman. The Olymel and Exceldor workers' strikes are a fight for rights and for lives. These strikes are taking place in the context of untenable conditions that workers face in the industry throughout North America. They point the way forward for an agri-food industry independent of the large supranational monopolies and independent of imperialist arrangements and monopoly right. This struggle is part of the fight to transform the situation. In defending their rights the workers are defending the rights of all. These workers, who have braved the most difficult working conditions during the pandemic, are showing exemplary courage that demands our unwavering support.

***All Out to Defend the Rights and the Fight of the Olymel and Exceldor Workers!***

*(Photo: Stovj Vallee-jonction)*

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**Website: [www.cpcml.ca](http://www.cpcml.ca) Email: [office@cpcml.ca](mailto:office@cpcml.ca)**