

# Labour Climate: Geoff Meggs

PRINT EMAIL

Friday, 16 October 2009

## Forest industry labour showdown looming large

For Steve Hunt, the steelworker now leading B.C.'s woodworkers, the recession is already four years old – not one – and the consequences are “ugly.”

“In the forest industry and manufacturing it’s devastating,” said Hunt.

“We saw it coming three years ago, with mill closures out of the norm. People were used to closures for fire season, snow or market conditions, but these were permanent shutdowns.

“It was overcapacity, in some respects, but the softwood-lumber deal had a devastating effect.”

The result is an industry in freefall, he said, taking down hundreds of jobs and dozens of communities while the forest companies battle among themselves and the government appears stumped for answers.

“I’m convinced they don’t know what to do,” Hunt said of Victoria.

He has seen three cabinet ministers come and go, along with a number of task forces, inquiries and forest czars since his union took in 30,000 B.C. woodworkers in a 2004 merger. And it’s no better on the employer side.

“There is no industry leadership anymore,” said Hunt, who is leading his members in bargaining with Interior forest companies this year.

“In the days of Forest Industrial Relations there was some semblance of order. Now we don’t see it.

“In the last round of coast bargaining, we had four different tables. The companies refused to meet in the same room.

“They showed outright contempt for each other.”

It was a stark contrast to Hunt’s experience in the mining sector, where competition is fierce, but firms will co-operate for the sake of their industry.

In forestry, he said, “they like to beat up on each other.”

As elected director of the union’s District 3, the proud former miner leads 55,000 steelworkers from Manitoba to B.C.

With countless collective agreements under his belt and the largest private-sector membership in the province, he is one of the province’s most seasoned labour leaders.

These days his work is dominated by the crisis in forest communities.

“There is terrible uncertainty and fear in forest towns,” Hunt said.

“Mackenzie and Port Alberni are the poster-children towns for the crisis, because they have the most extreme situation, but it’s everywhere.

“Families are now sacrificing assets. They own a house, but they can’t give it away.

“They don’t want to leave because a break in service will lose them half their pension.”



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Without a recovery – and none is in sight – they lose everything.

The union's 10-point plan for the forest industry has so far fallen on deaf ears.

The union has proposed collecting stumpage "at the back door of the mill," rather than when the tree is cut, opening the door to stumpage incentives for value-added manufacturing.

Export logs would pay the highest rate.

B.C. forest workers are also pushing for some restoration of appurtenancy, the policy that linked harvest rights to local processing.

But with Victoria's forest policy in a state of paralysis, the focus is on the bargaining table.

However, forest employers, apparently convinced this is the best of all possible worlds, are focusing on relentless cost-cutting while they wait for the American market to stagger to its feet.

The Interior companies, whose contract with the union expired June 30, have a long list of concession demands.

Steel's hard-nosed, pragmatic response to such demands has its roots in the mining sector: the books are opened and workers, Hunt said, "look for economies elsewhere to try to help management."

Any concessions are matched by a share of profits when economic health returns.

But with the industry in a deep slump, talks are moving slowly, opening the possibility that a contract might not be in place when coast firms come to the table next year.

The scene would be set for provincewide confrontation that could be decisive for the forest sector. •

Geoff Meggs, a longtime senior labour communications specialist, is president of Tideline Communications.

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**This article from Business in Vancouver October 13-19, 2009; issue 1042**

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