

Western, workers reach new agreement

Deal involving 2,400 forestry employees seen as pattern contract

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Coastal forestry workers belonging to two unions and employer Western Forest Products have reached labour agreements.

A tentative four-year deal has been struck between Western and 2,400 United Steelworkers members on Vancouver Island, B.C.'s mainland coast and Haida Gwaii.

"We strongly urge our members to accept this agreement, which would become a pattern agreement for contract talks with other coastal employers," USW Wood Council chairman Bob Matters said yesterday.

The agreement covers the vast majority of Western's unionized hourly work force belonging to USW Locals 1-1937 and 1-85, and the Council of USW Locals certified for certain divisions of Western Forest Products, the company said.

Under the agreement, workers will receive a signing bonus, wage increases in the third and fourth years of the contract, and adjustments to trades rates.

The agreement includes improvements to job security, health and welfare benefits, and in severance pay following permanent or partial closures. The agreement also rebuilds preferential hiring protections, the company said in a statement. It would also stabilize the long-term disability plan.

Details will be given to members at ratification meetings. Members in isolated areas may receive written information and mail-in ballots. Ratification could take several weeks, the company said.

The most recent agreement expired June 15, 2010, and the new contract would run until June 2014.

Western Forest Products was formed in 2005 by linking Doman Industries Ltd., Canfor Corp., and coastal Crown timberlands once held by MacMillan Bloedel. The company says it is the largest coastal B.C. woodlands operator and lumber producer.

It has an annual available harvest of about 7.4 million cubic metres of timber, but last year, logged just 3.2 million cubic metres. Western's products are sold in more than 25 countries.

Western mills at Duke Point in Nanaimo and at Ladysmith are down, although Ladysmith is expected to start up again in September.

Its mills at Saltair, Cowichan Bay, Somass, Alberni Pacific, Chemainus, are running, said Gary Ley, a Western spokesman.