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Western Forest Products reaches deal with workers

By [Jenn Marshall - Nanaimo News Bulletin](#)

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The Island's largest employer in the forestry industry has reached labour agreements with two unions.

Western Forest Products has signed an agreement with local 8 of the Pulp and Paper Workers of Canada – the union that represents hourly workers at the Ladysmith sawmill – and will be reopening the mill after Labour Day.

A tentative agreement with the United Steelworkers, which covers between 2,500 and 3,000 forestry workers, the bulk of whom are on the Island, has also been hammered out.

Bob Matters, USW Wood Council chairman, estimates that about 500 of the workers impacted by the tentative agreement live in the Nanaimo area. The union is recommending members vote in favour.

“In the context of the mess we're in, it's a good collective agreement,” he said.

Members begin voting this week.

If ratified by members, Matters expects the majority of smaller forestry companies will adopt the agreement with their own workers, as has happened in the past when the largest employer negotiates a contract with the union.

“Typically, we negotiate one big one and 90 per cent of the rest just agree to it,” he said. “It puts everyone into the same level playing field. When you have stability in the industry, it helps everybody.”

The tentative agreement includes improved health and welfare benefits; enhanced job security, as it guarantees that laid off Western workers have first chance at other options in the company; an extension of severance pay to workers laid off due to partial closures; and a stabilized long-term disability plan. The new contract would run until June 2014.

Matters hopes the agreement will allow Western to focus on re-opening its sawmill operations on the Island.

Western has eight mills on the Island, operating at about 50-per cent capacity. The downtown Nanaimo mill has been closed since December 2008 and only the planer is running at the Duke Point mill.

Gary Ley, Western spokesman, said the company will wait until the contract is ratified before commenting on whether it will help with re-opening mills.

Earlier this month, he told the News Bulletin that the company was monitoring the markets but could give no indication of when the two Nanaimo mills might be running again.

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