

Forestry workers, B.C. Interior companies contract talks at an impasse

No labour concessions on 'logical perspective cost-reduction avenues,' says management

BY FIONA ANDERSON, VANCOUVER SUN AUGUST 21, 2009



Pulp mill along the Fraser River at Prince George.

Photograph by: Glenn Baglo, Vancouver Sun files

VANCOUVER — Talks between forestry workers and their employers in British Columbia's Interior have broken down but both sides hope they'll be back at the bargaining table soon.

The most recent talks were scheduled for three days this week but ended abruptly at the beginning of day two with the Council on Northern Interior Forest Employment Relations (Conifer) complaining that the union — the United Steelworkers — wasn't taking their demands seriously.

Conifer — which represents employers in the northern part of B.C.'s interior — needs to find ways to cut costs, its executive director Michael Bryce said in an interview. And they've suggested a number of possible ways of doing that.

But anything that can be categorized as a concession the union has no receptiveness to, Bryce said.

Some concessions — Bryce calls them "logical perspective cost-reduction avenues" — are essential for the industry to get "a better economic footing," he said.

"I think if we're better poised to survive not just the current but a recurrence of a downturn, the better off we'll be as an industry," Bryce said.

The agreement being negotiated with Conifer is one of four collective agreements that expired June 30

between employers and the United Steelworkers, which represent about 9,000 to 10,000 workers in the area through a number of locals.

Historically the union will negotiate one agreement and use that as the pattern for the other three, said Bob Matters, chair of the USW Wood Council and the bargaining committee.

In initial talks, all four groups were looking for concessions, Matters said. But Conifer “were a little bit of a softer sell on the concessions.”

“Although they were still demanding concessions they weren’t quite as aggressive as the other ones were,” Matters said.

So the union chose to meet with that group first.

Now that talks have broken off, the union will be meeting to discuss strategy, including whether to take a strike vote, but Matters hopes to receive a phone call from Conifer scheduling more meetings.

And Conifer is also hoping there will be more talks “but with higher level of receptiveness of what’s important to us,” Bryce said.

The three other agreements currently in limbo are with Canfor Corp., West Fraser Timber and the Interior Forest Labour Relations Association which represents most of the employers in the southern interior.

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