

FOREST STRIKE IS A FIGHT FOR CONTROL

COASTAL LABOUR | Workers say their lives are being dragged down in pursuit of bottom line, as companies insist they must stay competitive



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VANCOUVER SUN

Second in a series

Sept. 8, 07

WEEKEND
EXTRA

A PORT ALBERNI
fire crackles in a rusted oil drum outside the gates of Western Forest Products' Alberni Pacific sawmill. A handful of striking workers warm themselves around it, waiting for the morning fog that shrouds the Valley to lift.

This is a bitter strike, over issues that have little to do with money. The pickets, members of the United Steelworkers union, are veterans, mostly in their 50s. They are fighting to get back what they lost three years ago in an arbitrated contract settlement that delayed, but did not resolve, issues that have cut through the coastal forest industry like a fault line.

Global markets and the demands of capital for a low-cost environment have pitted companies against workers, who see their lives being dragged down in pursuit of the bottom line. The pickets are out here to end company control over shifts and lack of severance pay for partial mill closures. Longer shifts are destroying their family lives and



The future of COASTAL FORESTRY

Friday: The town of Port Alberni is both a legacy of its forest industry past, and a reflection of broader events that have shaped the industry in this decade.

TODAY: Except for the pickets, it would be difficult to notice that there is an industry-wide strike going on in B.C.'s coastal forests.

Tuesday: Land-use changes have shaken the coastal forestry sector, and remind residents in resource-dependent towns just how much control they've lost over their lives.

WEEKEND EXTRA CONTINUES ON 65

WORKERS LEAVING FOREST INDUSTRY FOR OILPATCH

WEEKEND EXTRA FROM G1

are a factor in safety, they say. The partial mill closures allow companies to shut down operations in stages to reduce final severance packages to just a handful of employees.

The strike has put 7,000 B.C. coastal workers behind picket lines around 34 companies, all but three of them members of Forest Industrial Relations. But it's an incomplete strike, as a number of companies — some union, some non-union — are still operating, quietly keeping an unknown number of loggers at work. Except for the pickets, it would be hard to notice that there's a forest industry strike underway in this resource-dependent town.

In the bush, particularly on the remote B.C. coast, the strike and its impact is even more fuzzy. Crews that were once unionized and employed by large companies are now likely to be non-union and employed by contractors. The logs they harvest are floated in booms to the Lower Mainland, where non-union specialty mills process them, or they are barged across Juan de Fuca Strait to mills in the U.S.

The workers on the picket line say the issue is not just their jobs at stake but the jobs of their friends, neighbours and relatives as well.

"It's the brotherhood of the union that keeps us here," said maintenance worker Dean Kemps. Despite shifting changes imposed on sawmill workers that disrupt family life and rob even senior workers of their weekends, the loggers are having an even tougher time because of longer working hours, he said.

"I have family working in Port Alberni as well. My brother works in the bush, and I've got to support him. That's the way it is."

Colleague Dale Fitzgerald says the workers understand the companies are having a tough time. But he says

they have gone too far in making workers shoulder the cuts.

"We all understand that the companies have to do what they have to do to survive. But when they start hurting guys, there's no way we are going to take it," he says.

Yet there are visible signs that this forest workers' strike is having little real impact in the broader economy.

You don't have to go far to find it.

At the local chainsaw outlet, L.B. Woodchoppers, manager Bill Kirschner says business is down, but not the way it was in the past when a strike choked more than 50 per cent of the store's revenues. Loggers are still working despite the strike, and the construction sector, which uses similar equipment, is strong.

"Everything is slower, but there are still a lot of guys working," Kirschner says.

As if to make his point, a construction worker with a cut-off saw in need of repair walks into the store.

West of town at what was once MacMillan Bloedel's Sproat Lake division headquarters, non-union workers load logs on trucks driven by non-union drivers. They pass unmolested through town, largely because in today's coastal forest industry, there is no clear line between union and non-union companies.

The Sproat Lake division logs used to be loaded by union workers, but now, says Steelworkers member Wayne James, most companies run both union and non-union operations.

"They have a union side and a non-union side, and when they run into trouble on the union side they start up the non-union side and work somewhere else.

"It's a lot to do with the forest policy changes and the fact that companies can contract-out in smaller and smaller lots."

James sees it as part of a larger ideological battle that is being waged on the coast. He believes the union itself is at stake in this strike.

"If the companies are successful in breaking the union, then the next step is that the contractors are going to be paid less."

Currently, most contractors have rights to specific volumes of timber that were grandfathered into the Forests Act.

Contractors themselves have also expressed concerns that they see themselves as next in line, placing some contractor-employers in the same camp on this issue as the workers striking against them.

"In addition to the issues the Steelworkers have rallied against, we're concerned that some companies are seeking even more concessions designed to further weaken contractors," said Dave Lewis, executive director of the Truck Loggers Association in a recent *Vancouver Sun* article.

James said the strike appears headed into the fall, and that he knows of some forest workers who have left the industry for the oilpatch. There, he said, they are welcomed by employers offering incentives to keep them.

Workers are leaving the industry, confirmed Bill Routley, president of Steelworkers Local 1-80 at Duncan.

"We've had some of our guys heading off to find other work," Routley said. Many of the jobs are in the local construction industry, and Routley

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expects the workers will return when the forest strike is over.

He estimates 25 to 30 per cent of the union's members are employed doing something else during the labour disruption.

Routley believes a breakdown in respect between companies and their workers is a significant factor in the strike. There's no longer a sense of working toward a common goal — in the case of coastal loggers, getting as much wood in the water as they can. It doesn't take long hours or changed shift schedules to accomplish that, he said.

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Rick Jeffery, CEO of the Coast Forest Products Association, believes it is the union that has given up working toward the common goal of restoring the industry to profitability, a prerequisite to attracting investment for new equipment.

"We need more time to make this thing work, and these guys want to go back on the deal," Jeffery said in an interview.

At Interfor, which recently exited the West Coast of the Island by sell-

ing its timber rights to Clayoquot Sound First Nations, company president Duncan Davies says the issues that workers are fighting over are matters of survival for the industry.

The strike has shut down Interfor's two coastal sawmills in the Lower Mainland.

"The key thing everybody has to put in context here, and that the union continues to miss, is that very little of our product is sold in British Columbia," Davies said in an interview in Vancouver. "Our product is sold in a global marketplace, by people who are more competitive than we are.

"There are a whole variety of different reasons why they are more competitive, but one of them is the inflexibility of our rules around operations and shift-scheduling. We cannot afford to put ourselves in a position where we are less competitive than those folks who are selling similar products to ourselves. Pure and simple."

Davies said companies need that flexibility because markets change and if competitors can adjust more quickly, they they will take market

share at the expense of B.C. companies.

"There's different circumstances at different times and what we require is the flexibility to move arrangements to suit the circumstances. What worked in 2006 in a strong market doesn't necessarily work in 2007 in a weak market. What works when lots of logs are available might not work when there aren't many logs available.

"We require degrees of flexibility and we don't want to put ourselves in a position where you are held at ransom by the union on any changes in shift schedules that erode the benefits that you might otherwise gain by moving in that direction."

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In a Port Alberni coffee shop, logger James said companies appear to want what their competitors in the U.S. Pacific Northwest have: A non-union workforce earning less money and having less job security.

In the mid-1980s, he said, B.C. forest workers broke with the old International Woodworkers of America over wage cuts and working conditions that their U.S. counterparts were ready to accept.

Now, two decades later, he said the same battle is being waged on the B.C. coast.

"They broke the union in the Pacific Northwest. Now they want to do it here.

"The sad part is, I don't think a lot of people in this town realize how serious this is.

"Young people in particular can't afford to stay here and go through what's happening. So you've got the older guys here who have their mortgages paid off and the kids gone," said James.

"My concern is this: After it's all over, who's going to be left?"

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