

Loggers, sawmill workers on strike alert

Coast's \$2-billion industry could be behind picket lines by next week

Gordon Hamilton

Vancouver Sun

Wednesday, June 13, 2007

Eight thousand coastal loggers and sawmill workers were told Tuesday to get ready for a strike, after talks broke down Monday between the coast's largest employer group and the United Steelworkers.

"Crews in the coastal forest industry should prepare for potential strike action," the United Steelworkers said in a bargaining bulletin sent out Tuesday morning after Forest Industrial Relations, which represents 31 companies, walked away from the negotiating table.



CREDIT: CanWest News Services
Sawmill

The union is also negotiating with three major companies -- Interfor, Island Timberlands and Timberwest Forest -- separately. Those results are mixed.

The coast master agreement, which affects 8,000 workers, expires at midnight Thursday. If all sets of talks break down, 72-hour strike notice could be delivered Friday starting the count-down to a strike next week, putting the \$2-billion sawmilling and logging industry behind picket lines.

A strike would also begin a 30-day countdown for the coast's pulp and paper industry, which has built up a one-month supply of wood chips in anticipation of logging and sawmilling operations going down.

"I would characterize the probability of a strike as being very high," Rick Jeffery, president of the Coast Forest Products Association, said Tuesday. "There are significant portions of the Steelworkers demands that will take us back to the 1980s."

Kevin Mason, analyst with Equity Research Associates, said the logging and sawmilling sector has been preparing for a strike but that the coast's seven pulp and paper producers are vulnerable, even though theirs is a totally separate industry whose workers are represented by a different union.

"For the the pulp and paper industry, which is relying on wood chips, this is a huge thing," Mason said.

Mason said if the union calls a strike, it could be a long, bitter one.

"Both sides seem quite entrenched and quite far apart."

The industry and labour have gone through significant transformations since 2003, when a three-week-long strike was only resolved after both sides agreed to an arbitrated settlement. That settlement, imposed in 2004 by mediator Don Monroe, sowed the seeds for further conflict as it was viewed by workers as being pro-industry.

Since then, industry has used the 2004 agreement to contract-out logging operations and make changes in worker shifts that have not sat well with employees. Further, in 2005, the old IWA was merged into the United Steelworkers, a larger, more powerful union that observers say is ready to flex its muscles on the coast.

Steve Hunt, western regional director for the Steelworkers, said the union is not looking for a strike but that employers are seeking even further concessions than contained in the Monroe agreement.

"The last thing we want to do is strike. That's the easiest thing to do," Hunt said. "We are trying to do some repair work from the last collective agreement that was imposed and that's a tough thing for workers to see their way through.

"Many benefits that these guys have enjoyed for a long time were taken away. The issue here is: How do we restore some of those benefits. We know we can't get them all back, but that's where we are trying to land."

Hunt said FIR walked out of negotiations Monday night. One other set of negotiations -- Island Timberlands -- is going well, he said.

The union is still negotiating with Interfor as well but no talks are taking place at TimberWest, where the union and company are involved in a labour relations board dispute over the number of workers actually employed by TimberWest.

Hunt said a significant change since the 2004 arbitrated contract is that the Steelworkers is a stronger union than the old IWA, with deeper pockets to sustain workers through a long strike.

Forest Industrial Relations spokesman Ron Shewchuk characterized the break-down in talks as a time-out, saying the employer bargaining arm is prepared to return to the table if the union is prepared to move on company demands.

"I don't think by any means that all hope is lost," he said.

The main issues separating the two sides are:

- Changes in shifting that give employers the right to set 10-hour, four-day work weeks, run operations on weekends and change shifts with little notice.
- Contracting out, always a contentious issue, which has yet to even be tabled at the FIR talks.
- A two-year agreement sought by the Steelworkers to align the expiry of the coastal contract with the contracts covering Interior workers, which expire in 2009.

The industry opposes that.

Shewchuk said companies are prepared to make some changes in the shifting provisions but not give up what was gained in the Monroe agreement as it makes companies more cost-effective.

"The Monroe arbitrated settlement was directly responding to the realities of an industry that needs to improve its competitiveness. We were not in good shape. And those conditions have only worsened since then. The Canadian dollar has risen further and the housing market in the U.S. has declined. Now we have a surcharge on lumber going out of the country.

"We have made some proposals but we really don't see any movement on the union's part. We'd be willing to talk further if there was an opportunity for the union to move."

Hunt responded: "FIR should go and dream somewhere else. They are the ones who walked away from the table."

ghamilton@png.canwest.com

© The Vancouver Sun 2007

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2007 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.