

Forestry strike about lifestyle



Fred Davies Photo

UNITED STEELWORKERS UNION members picket outside an Island Timberlands facility. Key disputes in the strike, now two months old, include shift scheduling and protection against contracting out.

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There's little sign of any breakthrough to end the coastal forestry strike now into its second month.

"We're in it for the long haul," said United Steelworkers Union member John Karadona from a picket line outside an Island Timberlands camp facility south of Parksville. "It's a lifestyle we're trying to preserve. It's not about dollars and cents."

Key to the duration of the strike are stagnant global markets and the accompanying move towards a low-cost environment the industry believes it needs to stay competitive. Workers say that's meant increased company control over shifts that have become both longer and less predictable.

"My weeks are 60 to 62 hours long. I leave for work at around quarter to five in the morning," said Karadona. "They're saying the savings will be

invested in mills and all they're doing is shutting mills down."

With little progress, no scheduled talks and the prospect of a lengthy impasse, some workers are leaving the industry, perhaps for good.

"I bet we've lost 25 per cent of the workforce," said Karadona.

"We have put a fair offer on the table," said Rick Jeffery president and CEO of the Coast Forest Products Association. "The shifting that they're asking for doesn't exist in any other heavy industry."

Jeffery said logging by non-union companies has continued despite the labour unrest. He's adamant the industry must have flexibility in scheduling if it's to survive under tight economic conditions that have become even more restrictive in light of a Canadian dollar flirting with par in comparison to its U.S. counterpart.

"Sixty five per cent of our product goes into the U.S.," he said. "Markets are unlikely to return to health until late 2009."

As the labour dispute lingers, the B.C government has chosen to sit on a plan that could help end the dispute involving 7,000 forestry workers.

A coast recovery plan drafted in response to industry pleas to assist the beleaguered sector will not be released during contract negotiations. B.C. Forests and Range Minister Rich Coleman is on record saying the report is being held due to its potential impact on bargaining.

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