

Molson brewery workers occupy Ontario plant

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Some 30 workers, members of the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW), have occupied a Molson brewery in Barrie, north of Toronto, since a week ago Sunday, in an effort to win assurances that some of them will be able to secure full-time employment at another Toronto-area facility when their plant closes next fall.

At least 350 unionized jobs at the brewery are to be eliminated when operations are moved to Etobicoke, just west of Toronto, next September. Molson has consistently refused requests to move jobs from Barrie to the Etobicoke plant since it announced the closing of the Barrie brewery in October.

The occupation began following a union meeting where workers were told that the company had called off talks after five days of negotiations. Some 200 workers at the meeting stormed out in anger and took up positions barricading the Barrie factory gates. Workers gave assurances that the product would be kept safe and police were allowed in to verify that no damage was done.

According to CAW Local 306 Vice President Terry MacIsaac, who was present at the meeting, workers took it upon themselves to carry out the occupation. The union has taken no official position in support of the occupation, but has said that the protest will continue until Molson agrees to job transfers. The strategy of the CAW is limited to a boycott of Molson products, and the union has sent a single bus on a tour of the province to enlist support.

Molson has said that a \$100-million upgrade at Etobicoke will result in the loss of about 100 full-time jobs. It contends that the only new positions available when production is transferred from Barrie to Etobicoke will be 50 part-time jobs. According to the CAW, however, 100 to 150 new full-time jobs will

result from the upgrade at the Etobicoke brewery.

The Etobicoke facility is organized under a different union, the National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE), with a comparable contract, but part-time employees receive significantly lower wages and benefits than full-time workers.

Almost half of the workers affected by the planned shutdown moved to Barrie when a Molson plant on Fleet Street in Toronto was shut down nine years ago and the company agreed to have their jobs transferred.

Of the Barrie workers, about 100 have said they will take an early retirement package being offered by the company, but the remainder have few prospects. In addition to asking for full-time positions at the Toronto brewery, the union is demanding a better severance package. Molson has stated publicly that it is offering workers up to \$200,000 in severance and Hemi Mitic, assistant to CAW President Buzz Hargrove, has said, "We'll solve the problem as soon as I see that in writing."

According to company officials, in order to remain competitive globally Molson has to improve utilization of its beer production capacity by consolidating its two Ontario brewing operations into one. Molson has six other breweries across Canada.

The job cuts in Barrie are part of a restructuring operation announced by Molson in September aimed at increasing productivity and cutting costs. The Montreal-based brewery, which is North America's oldest beer brand name, employs 4,000 workers across Canada and has more than \$2 billion in annual sales, with profits in excess of \$170 million last year.

Molson has said it will not take any action at this time against the workers occupying the Barrie plant. The company has, however, applied for conciliation with the Ontario Labour Relations Board.



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