

Workers fight union-busting at a Canadian metal fabricating plant

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One hundred eighty workers locked out since December 31 by the management of Star Metal Manufacturing in Windsor, Ontario began an occupation of the plant last week to demand the company return to the bargaining table.

The workers, members of Canadian Auto Workers Local 195, were locked out without notice during negotiations on a new contract. The owner, Peter Friessen, offered a one dollar increase over the life of the three-year contract in return for a reduction in existing benefits.

The contract is the first since the union was organized in the plant three years ago. At that time the base pay for a new worker was below the poverty wage of \$8 (Can) per hour. Presently the base pay is \$11.05 per hour, a wage workers on the picket line said was comparable to the income of a family on welfare.

According to the union members, the company issued an ultimatum and then brought scab laborers into the plant under the guise of hiring new security guards. During the month and a half since the lockout began, several workers said they saw the guards with work boots and overalls on as they entered and exited the plant. During this time Friessen refused the union's request to negotiate on the contract.

According to workers, in an effort to bring the owner back to the bargaining table members of the union local went into the plant on February 16 to "strongly suggest" to the security guards that they leave the plant. Within a few minutes of the workers entering the plant, all management personnel and the security staff were ushered out. The union has kept an occupation force inside the facility and has maintained a 24-hour presence outside the factory. According to workers on the picket line, their action has received widespread support from workers throughout the area.

Support for the strike was evident. Several workers were on the picket line from nearby Ford, General Motors and Chrysler plants, and horns were constantly honking as workers passed by on the busy road.

Dan Sins, spokesman for the union, said they decided it was better for the union members to "watch over and protect the material" inside the fabricating plant than the security guards. "It was obvious that Friessen didn't want to negotiate," said Sins. "Our goal is to get back to the talks. We want to go back to work, but we can't live on what they are paying us."

The plant manufactures metal racks that are used to transport parts for the Big Three automotive manufacturers, all of whom have plants in the Windsor area. Workers on the picket line, many of them young, were visibly angry about the conditions in the plant and the treatment they have received from management.

One worker said the company had gone through at least 1,800 to 2,000 employees over the last four years. "We told him he should improve the conditions in the plant," he said. "A happy worker is a better worker. It makes sense from the standpoint of more and better production. Do you know what he said when we said this? He said that's not the kind of people I want working for me."

Workers said one of their major concerns was safety. They are issued one pair of steel-toed work shoes, which workers say are inadequate. They often work with sharp pieces of metal, sometimes weighing up to 1,000 pounds, and if a piece of steel drops on a worker's foot the shoes provide little protection. Troy said, "We need a cover over the entire foot. But he won't pay for that because it costs over \$100 while the shoes he gives us cost \$70."

Other workers said the owner had the same attitude towards overalls and work glasses. Lance Lussier said

the company would only give a worker a pair of overalls after he had been there for 90 days, and then he only got one pair for the life of the contract. “If they get ripped, and there's a lot of sharp metal, it's your fault and you have to pay for it,” said Lussier.

Other workers said they wore prescription glasses but they also were only allowed one pair during the three years of the contract. “If you are welding, one pair may last a few months. After that you can't see out of them. Prescription glasses cost \$150 to \$180 and we have to pay for them.”

“He could afford to pay us better,” continued Lussier. “We do good work and he knows it. We have quality control people who check everything. We even get work from other shops because we do it so well.”

“It's a matter of respect,” said one older employee. “There is no way we can live off the contract. You're talking about 25 cents an hour for each year for a wage increase. Just add it up. At 25 cents per hour you are talking about \$2 a day or \$10 a week. You can't even buy two packs of cigarettes with that.” Another worker said welfare presently paid what someone making \$11.00 per hour made after taxes, commenting, “We would be better off on welfare.”

“He's out to break the union,” said the older worker. “With the amount of money he has spent on security and scab labor we could have had a decent wage agreement and be back to work,” he added. “Well, we want to send a message because we have received a lot of support in this town.”



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