

Fabcon workers in Minnesota fight company attacks

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Workers at the Fabcon manufacturing facility in Savage, Minnesota, 15 miles south of Minneapolis, faced sustained management attacks as they entered their second week on strike against wage and benefit cuts.

During the early morning hours, April 12, Fabcon management for the first time bused in 15-20 strikebreakers to the plant, which fabricates precast concrete wall systems for the construction industry. Previously, only salaried personnel had been attempting to run production.

The strikers, members of Laborer's Local 563, voted 52-2 on April 5 to reject the company's last offer that would give management—in the name of “flexibility”—an opening to abolish weekend overtime compensation, resulting in an estimated 30 percent loss in pay.

“Before this, they paid time-and-a-half on Saturday and double-time on Sunday,” a worker with more than 30 years explained to the WSW. Many workers at the plant, which opened in 1971, have decades of experience there.

“Up until now, the shift ran Monday to Sunday,” he said. “Here's the catch in the new agreement. They will pay you overtime if it's your sixth or seventh consecutive day of work. And they will determine what day of the week your schedule begins. If they give you a day off in the middle of your workweek, you will never see your seventh consecutive day. We know if we don't stand up now, we've lost premium pay forever. We will never get it back.”

“There's another clause in the contract. If you're laid off over a year, you lose seniority. Then they can bring you back in the plant at \$10 an hour. And they're going to pick and choose who they want to bring back.”

The proposed contract also includes significant hikes

in health insurance costs. “The worst part about the insurance,” the striker told the WSW, “is that they had 3 plans—silver, gold, and bronze. Previously, the last two were free, except for a \$4,400 deductible. But they're proposing now that we will have to pay monthly premiums besides the deductible. Now the premiums will go from zero up to \$50 a month.”

Fabcon has proposed a wage freeze in the first year of the contract, followed by small increases in years two and three. The union contends the overall increase will amount to a miniscule 20-cent increase. “People are saying to me,” declared a striker, “‘What are you guys striking for?’ But we aren't asking for anything. We're just trying to hang on to what we've got.”

Strikers report having to work brutal shifts at Fabcon as long as 16, 18 or 20 hours. “We tell the new guys, just wait and see in five years what your body looks like,” said one striker.

On top of that, working conditions are dangerous. Workers report back strains, pulled muscles, gashes and broken bones. The precast walls built at the plant are fabricated in a 680-square-foot bed that contains a steel cable stretched to a tension of 7,200 pounds per square inch. “When that cable breaks you need to jump out of the way,” said another worker. “It comes down the bed like a snake. You really have to watch what you are doing. It hit one guy and shattered his arm.”

When workers walked off the job, it halted production on one of Fabcon's biggest jobs, a government contract for work at Fort Carson in Colorado. Besides its Minnesota facility, which is Fabcon's largest, the company also has plants in Pennsylvania, Indiana and Ohio.



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