

Hundreds of paper mill jobs to be axed in US Pacific Northwest

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24 November 2017

Up to 300 workers will have their jobs cut in the one-industry town of Camas, Washington when the paper mill, which has operated since 1885, closes down several of its operations. Approximately 120 to 140 workers will remain in the huge facility, which, at its height in the early 1970s, employed over 2,600 workers.

Multinational paper products giant Georgia-Pacific, a subsidiary of Koch Industries, says weak copy-paper demand is forcing it to halt production of paper used in printers and copiers, as well as wood pulping operations and other related procedures. It plans to implement these production and job cuts in the second quarter of 2018 while continuing its profitable paper towel manufacturing operations.

“The paper mill is the reason Camas exists,” Peter Capell, city administrator, told the local media. “The biggest concern we have about this is the people. They have mortgages, college payments, retirement. It’s something I wouldn’t wish on anybody.”

In August, NORPAC (North Pacific Paper Company), located in Longview, Washington, announced the shutdown of its Paper Machine No. 1, one of three such machines, and the slashing of half of the production workers, or approximately 50 jobs. One Rock Capital Partners moved rapidly after buying the mill from Weyerhaeuser in 2016, unilaterally imposing a ten-percent wage cut and significant reductions in retirement benefits on the nonunion workforce this past May.

Georgia-Pacific’s notice comes less than a month after West Linn Paper Company announced plans to immediately close its Willamette Falls, Oregon mill, eliminating 250 jobs. The mill was previously closed in 1996 by James River Corporation and reopened a year later as a nonunion operation.

Greg Pallesen, president of the Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers (AWPPW), sought to direct workers’ anger and opposition in a nationalist direction, blaming “cheaper” Asian paper imports. The anti-Asian agitation—which echoes the America First nationalism of Trump and his fascistic former aide Stephen Bannon—has nothing to do with defending workers’ jobs. Its aim is to subordinate the working class to the profit interests of the corporations and impose further wage and benefit cuts in the name of making American capitalism more competitive.

This is why the national AWPPW and Local 5 (the bargaining agent for the Camas workers) have remained silent about the overwhelming rejection by rank-and-file workers of Georgia-Pacific’s retrograde contract offer and their vote last August to authorize strike action.

The company’s contract offer would create a two-tier structure, with new employees earning lower wages and benefits. In addition to a 20 percent reduction in wages, new hires would lose the defined pension plan, have fewer holidays, reduced vacation pay and no wage increase.

For current employees, wages would only increase a miserly one percent on average, while allowing only health care plans with reduced benefits and higher deductibles. In addition, the proposed contract would allow the contracting out of floor work, maintenance and production.

That this contract has been in negotiation since 2014 gives the highly paid executives at Georgia-Pacific and the billionaire Koch brothers every reason to believe that the union will sanction the latest round of job cuts. The AWPPW’s capitulation in 2010 to Georgia-Pacific’s imposition of a concessions-filled “last, best and final” ultimatum provides additional grist to their

belief. Despite every member voting “no” at that time against the proposed contract and authorizing a strike, the AWPPW, revealing its pro-corporate orientation, refused to conduct any struggle against G-P, let alone mobilize thousands of paper mill workers facing similar attacks by other wood and paper corporations.

In defying the strike authorization vote by rank-and-file workers, the union is acting as a labor police force for the corporations, facilitating the slashing of 300 jobs now and even more in the future. This betrayal will only lead to more social devastation in the region, including a new wave of home foreclosures, drug overdoses and suicides.

Since the purchase of Georgia-Pacific by the Koch brothers in 2005 for \$21 billion, the number of better-compensated unionized G-P employees has dropped from 22,000 to 11,800 currently. While the brothers’ far-right inclinations and support for the Republican Party are notorious, the states of Washington and Oregon have both been longtime bastions of the Democratic Party. The promotion of economic nationalism and the political subordination of workers to the Democratic Party has been used to block workers from taking up the struggle which is necessary: an industry-wide battle combined with a political struggle against both pro-corporate parties, the Democrats and Republicans.

Paper mill workers have to draw the lessons of the 2010 Longview Fibre Paper and Packaging Inc. (now owned by KapStone Paper and Packaging) contract struggle. In the 2010 contract fight, a bitter conflict in which workers rejected two offers, the second time by 634 to 1, workers were ultimately forced to accept concessions after the union offered an unconditional return to work. Two years later, after years of losing money, Longview Fiber earned \$118 million.

In the 2015 contract negotiations, this time with the new owner KapStone, a strike was called after the company declared an impasse and unilaterally imposed its final contract offer. After a seven-day strike, the AWPPW sabotaged the struggle and offered another unconditional return to work, which the company accepted. Upon ratification, which occurred two years after the previous contract expired, the AWPPW could only cite the rehiring of four workers accused of strike misconduct by the company to falsely declare the strike a “victory.”

This record shows that paper mill workers can place no confidence in the AWPPW. Only through the formation of rank-and-file committees that will appeal for industry-wide support, nationally and internationally, can a genuine struggle be organized to defend the jobs and living standards of all workers.



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