

British Columbia forestry workers strike enters third week

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Around 3,000 forestry workers in British Columbia are in their third week of a strike to beat back attempts by the employer, Western Forest Products (WFP), to impose draconian cuts to their wages, benefits, pensions, and working conditions. The strike includes 1,500 WFP hourly employees and close to 1,500 workers employed by the company's contractors and third-party operators.

Workers voted overwhelmingly by 98 percent to strike WFP after management rejected union proposals during talks. The company is Vancouver Island's largest forestry business, with sales of almost C\$1.2 billion, net income of C\$69.2 million, and a total liquidity of C\$250.4 million for 2018.

WFP is seeking to replace the current pension plan with a Registered Savings Plan, an act which will impose the burden of funding pensions onto individual workers and clear the way for the company to end employer contributions for existing employees and new hires. The company is also demanding the right to implement a new plan for seniority, which they want to control. While the forestry workers are asking for an extension of coverage for the Long-Term Disability Plan (LTD) from age 60 to 65, an increase of the LTD monthly benefit, and a cost-of-living adjustment every three years, WFP wants a reduction in their rate of contribution. The employer is calling for a change in the benefit provider whose plan is currently administered by United Steelworker Trustees.

The strikers feel that placing the benefit plan in the hands of a private, third-party carrier will result in the loss of their rights.

Moreover, with a current rate of inflation greater than 2 percent, WFP's wage proposal would exceed 2 percent only in the fifth year of a long-term contract. This means that workers would have to endure real

terms pay cuts for four years. Meanwhile, WFP President Don Demens has enjoyed a salary hike of 30 percent for the years 2016-2017.

Management has also proposed significant cuts in wages for new hires and a long phase-in period to achieve regular rates, reduction in vacation times, elimination of the hours methods for vacation pay, the right to force workers to use vacation during curtailments, elimination of the floating holiday, the imposition of prerequisites for leave of absences, and elimination of union training.

Underscoring that the United Steelworkers union (USW) is ready to go along with these demands in principle and impose a rotten concessions-laden agreement, local USW President Brian Buttler declared in a news release that he is ready for talks and that a deal could be reached quickly. Significantly, the USW is proposing mediated talks led by Vince Reddy, an experienced mediator who was involved in hammering out a concessions-laden contract that ended a strike by 50,000 BC teachers in 2014. WFP claims to be in favour of mediation, but opposes Reddy's appointment.

The company's actions since the beginning of the strike make clear it has no intention of compromising. On July 1, the first day of the strike, WFP applied to the Labor Relations Board (LRB) for an order to extend USW1-1937's 72-hour strike notice by 144 more hours to enable it to move all of its logs in salt water into fresh water. The company claimed that the logs would be "imminently perishable" if left in salt water. This was a transparent attempt to move the logs from behind the picket lines to be able to sell them and continue collection of revenue, which would have allowed the company to weather the strike for a longer period. WFP has violated the ruling by hiring towing companies to remove log booms declared hot and which are behind

picket lines.

On July 4, WFP filed a motion with the LRB to bring to an end the 50-plus years practice of Me-Too Agreements. A Me-Too Agreement is an agreement that a contractor signs with the USW stating that the contractor will honor the results of negotiations between the union and the predominant licensee, which is currently Western Forest Products. On July 11, the LRB ruled the strike to be illegal for three contractors and that it was unlawful for the 105 workers involved to be on strike.

The USW has struck 167 companies and contractors but has allowed 121 others to continue operations. The union claims that an industry-wide strike would not put increased pressure on WFP and that allowing WFP competitors to continue their operations increases pressure on the company.

This is a pack of lies. In reality, the USW policy means that WFP workers are being forced to fight on their knees while the company proceeds with the aggressive enforcement of its demands. Far from upping pressure on the company, the USW's strategy serves to divide and weaken the strikers, who are cut off from their most powerful ally, lumber workers across the province and the Canadian and international working class.

The USW is also trying to starve the strikers into submission. While the union claims to have a C\$500 million strike fund, it is stringing out strikers on a miserly C\$20 a day, and only issuing these payments after the strike has passed the three-week mark.

What the USW really fears is that an all-out strike would ignite a movement throughout BC and Canada that would join the offensive being mounted by workers across Canada and internationally in defence of their jobs and living standards. To prevent this, the union is determined to isolate the forest workers and reach a rotten compromise with WFP management.

Strikers should recall the role played by the USW in the recently concluded 18-month-long lockout at the ABI aluminum smelter in Quebec, where management successfully imposed similarly sweeping concessions to those being demanded by WFP. The USW deliberately isolated more than 1,000 locked-out workers and refused to call for solidarity strikes and protests by its hundreds of thousands of members. When the company threatened the workers with the complete shutdown of

the facility if they did not vote in favour of the concessions-laden deal, the USW made no recommendation until the last minute. This left workers to face the intimidation of company management, the corporate media, and the right-wing populist Quebec government, all of whom were denouncing the locked-out workers as overpaid and privileged.

The USW is even more determined to prevent a broadening of the WFP workers' struggle as it gears up, together with the entire union bureaucracy, to mount a pro-Liberal get-out-the-vote campaign in this fall's federal elections. The USW has played a key role as a close partner of the Trudeau government over the past four years, championing the government's embrace of Trump's protectionist trade policies targeting China with poisonous Canadian nationalism.

When Trump imposed tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum products, the USW joined with the Trudeau government in arguing for the lifting of the sanctions on the basis that Canadian steel is used to make US warplanes and tanks, and is therefore critical for US imperialism's war machine. A genuine mass movement of lumber workers and other sections of the working class in opposition to all givebacks and austerity would inevitably expose this reactionary right-wing alliance between the union bureaucracy and the Canadian ruling elite's preferred party of government.

WFP strikers must form rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the USW bureaucrats. These committees must strive immediately to break out of the isolation imposed by the USW on striking workers by organizing a common fight of all lumber workers for wage increases, and the defence of pension rights and workplace benefits. In addition, they must decisively reject the nationalist filth peddled by the USW and strive to unite their struggle with those of all workers in Canada, the United States, and internationally on the basis of a socialist program.



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