

Minnesota Blandin Paper workers continue strike, as Teamsters threaten mediation to push pro-company agreement

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UPM Blandin Paper workers in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, are continuing their strike after talks between the company and Teamsters Local 346 last Wednesday failed to reach an agreement. The strike by 166 workers, representing 80 percent of the plant's employees, is going into its third week.

On strike since July 15, Blandin Paper workers are fighting to overturn the two-tier wage and benefits system, concessions forced through by the union in 2016, which included insufficient wage increases.

In a statement, Blandin said in its latest round of talks that it had offered a multi-year contract that included wage increases, increased paid time off and some benefit adjustments.

Teamsters Local 346 President Jeff Oveson said the union is urging the company to go into mediation to finalize a contract. "They made an offer that adjusted some of the economics but didn't address any of our core concerns," said Oveson. "Again, in the end, they kind of just shuffled things around."

Blandin is one of Minnesota's largest privately owned paper mills, holding over 187,000 acres of forest. It employs 230 people and has shuttered numerous mills over the past 20 years, cutting its size down from around 900 employees in 2000. The mill, built in 1901 and purchased by Helsinki, Finland-based UPM Kymmene in 1997, has been a significant employer in Grand Rapids. According to the Department of Employment and Economic Development, paper manufacturing employment in Minnesota dropped by 43 percent from 2002 to 2022.

In a revealing statement, Oveson said, "We, as the

Union body, have been in touch with federal mediation throughout the process, and the employer has not, but we told the employer across the table yesterday that we feel like going forward, we have to have mediation involved to try to get to an agreement."

Oveson's statement is a warning that a sellout is imminent. A mediator confirmed that the union will not leverage the power of the striking workers or call on other Teamsters members for support.

The union is intentionally tying its own hands with a mediator to ram through a concessionary contract. At the end of the strike's first week, a Teamsters rally included State Senator Grant Hauschild and Representative Dave Lislegard. Both are members of the Democratic Farmer Labor (DFL) Party, as Minnesota's branch of the Democratic Party is known.

Notably, during the rally, Lislegard promoted the idea that politics does not matter in regard to strikes and workers' rights. This is a deception. The Teamsters and the Democratic Party stand for capitalist politics, the subordination of workers' rights and livelihoods to the drive for corporate profits. For its part, the Democratic Party is feigning support for the strike as it relies on the union to end it. This is the same party that intervened to block a strike by 100,000 rail workers last winter.

The strike by Blandin Paper workers is ultimately a fight to reverse the past betrayals of the Teamsters since the workers' demands call for the reversal of concessions which the union previously imposed.

The strike at Blandin is a part of an upsurge of strikes across the country and internationally, including but not limited to 1,400 workers at National Steel Car's rail car manufacturing plant in Hamilton, Ontario, who have been on strike since June 29, as well as tens of

thousands of actors and screenwriters. Closer to home, over 50 workers from Leinenkugel's and New Dairy Select Milk in Wisconsin are striking as well to win back concessions surrendered by the Teamsters, and 200 healthcare workers in Loretto Hospital in Chicago, Illinois, are on strike.

Blandin workers should well note that the Teamsters recently called off a potential strike by 340,000 UPS workers with a tentative agreement last month. The UPS agreement, while celebrated by the Teamster bureaucracy as "historic," continues the hated two-tier wage system for part-time workers, who make up an overwhelming majority of UPS workers. It also imposes a freeze in company pension contributions for most workers and contains wage increases that do not keep up with inflation.

To win their fight for better pay and an end to the hated two-tier wage and benefits system, Blandin workers must build their rank-and-file power and unite with UPS workers and other sections of workers across the country and internationally. To do this, they must form new rank-and-file committees, independent of the Teamsters leadership and the DFL. Through these committees, workers can discuss their own demands, break the isolation currently being imposed by the Teamsters leadership and effectively mobilize the powerful support that exists.



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