

Yelling timber; the forest industry at stake

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The old saying is that there are two sides to every story -- and the truth is somewhere in the middle. The current coastal forestry strike, at risk of turning into a Mexican standoff if it goes on much longer, is badly in need of some middle ground. Unfortunately, the United Steelworkers are not too keen on going to mediation. In the last strike in 2003 a third party, in forced arbitration, handed down a decision that some say gave the forest companies more than they could have got at the bargaining table.

Among the items strongly opposed by the union, then the Industrial, Wood and Allied Workers, was increased shift flexibility. So for the forest companies to come back to the table demanding yet more on shifting has been a bad starting point.

The coastal forest industry, which once dominated the global wood industry, is now a shadow of what it was and faces a real crisis.

Competition from companies in Washington and Oregon is now formidable. Also, the U.S. and Japanese housing markets, the two biggest buyers of wood harvested on the B.C. coast, are in a slump.

On top of that, the Canadian dollar, great for tourists going south, is hammering the industry.

As the coastal companies focused on that prized product, first growth timber in the last 20 years, the U.S. north west companies geared up for processing second-growth timber.

The Canadian companies have no one to blame but themselves for not seeing what was happening and taking appropriate steps. Instead, mills here are being closed while others are being made increasingly efficient at huge cost.

Though the spokesman for the Coast Forest Products Association, Rick Jeffery, says this strike is not "directly" about money, his statement is somewhat disingenuous. It is clear that coastal timber companies want to run mills at longer hours with fewer people. That's all about money.

The companies cannot realistically expect to accomplish this without the reaction from the United Steelworkers they are now seeing.

After arbitration in 2003 "gutted" the collective agreement, according to former IWA president Jack Munro, the concern also arose over safety. And that came to pass. As Jeffery said, 43 deaths last year was "deplorable."

The forest industry has to be congratulated for moving quickly to get this problem in hand. The industry has designed programs they expect will create a culture of safety.

But it does not do for the industry to dismiss the union's concerns about shifting; they were right the last time. Safety may become an increasing issue if the companies get another concession they are demanding, contracting out.

No matter how great that culture of safety is, it means nothing in the face of poor decisions brought on by fatigue. The union's apprehension of longer hours with increased "shift flexibility" is understandable.

It's also difficult to believe that such a culture of safety will be absorbed by small contractors who don't have a culture of safety already. And those contractors will be under greater pressure than before to get the best out of their contract. In addition to increased pressure, there is a temptation to cut corners.

The union may have legitimate concerns about safety with increased shifting, but the companies have a point that the unions also have an "iconic" view of prior agreed working hours.

Somewhere between real safety concerns and the requirements of the companies there is a middle ground.

It's time for both sides to start talking about where that ground is.

Coastal forest companies find themselves in a very difficult place. Though it's not up to union members to save them, the union may want to consider that certain concessions may also save jobs.

The global economy is such that ruthless competition, and very cheap foreign labour, may very seriously damage this industry. If no middle ground is found, there will soon be nothing to stand on.