

Pulp truth

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Unite Hosts Workers Uniting Exchange Visit with USW

USW members from the U.S. and Canada participated in an exchange visit with Unite the week of Nov. 14-19 and learned how trade unionism operates in the UK.

Sally Feistel, Brian Harder and Ron Espinoza wrote blog entries about their experiences at www.workersuniting.org.

Feistel got the opportunity to sit in on some difficult negotiations Unite had with two employers who were having financial difficulties and an employer who was shutting down a facility. She, along with Unite committee members, met with a plant manager about health and safety.

“I explained to the group the USW’s hazard mapping, which they were very interested in,” she said. “This only goes to show how Workers Uniting can work together on

common issues facing us all.”

Harder, who lives in Canada, learned how organizing laws are different in the UK, and came away with ideas on organizing that he plans to put into action. He and Feistel gained a better understanding of how national bargaining works in the UK when they attended a preparatory meeting on the pay talks for the Confederation of Paper Industries (CPI) national agreement.

Espinoza joined Feistel and Harder in a tour of Parliament and visit with Member of Parliament (MP) Jim Fitzpatrick, a Unite member who is part of the Unite caucus. Espinoza also toured a Georgia-Pacific mill for review of health and safety practices.

They all engaged in discussions with Unite officials, local leaders and members.

Work Plan Forged at Workers Uniting Meeting

Local union leaders, elected officials and staffers from Unite and the USW met in Pittsburgh prior to the USW paper sector conference to establish further communication, identify common issues of concern and establish possibilities for joint action.

They established a paper, print and packaging sector work plan that focuses on grassroots member education about Workers Uniting and why it is important; communication and mobilization within joint employers; improving health and safety systems; supporting global campaigns; and collaboration on an illegal logging campaign.

To improve communication, the plan includes developing a Workers Uniting Facebook site, creating handbills showing where Workers Uniting and international solidarity work has built power and confronted corporate agendas, and having conference calls between Unite lay reps and USW local unions from the same company.

During the meeting there was much discussion over the use of agency (temporary or contract) workers and health and safety programs.

Agency workers do not have employment rights, Unite Assistant General Secretary Tony Burke said. They register with an employment agency, sometimes have to pay a fee and are very difficult to organize. Their vacation and

sick pay is the responsibility of the agency. Being agency workers, they cannot get a mortgage or a loan for a new car and usually live in poor accommodations.

Unite has been able to help these workers. Under the industry agreement Unite has with the Confederation of Paper Industries (CPI), an agency worker has to have the same terms and conditions of employment as the full-time employees they are working with.

USW local union leaders talked about negotiating to get rid of a temporary work force and putting limits on the amount of time an employee has to work temporarily before getting hired full time.

Fix the Hazards

Local union leaders from both unions talked about health and safety problems and the need to focus on eliminating hazards. They decided to form a “Fix the Hazards—Don’t Blame the Worker” campaign working group. A full program will be worked out to educate workers and managers on health and safety being a hierarchy of controls. Two local union/chapel leaders from the USW and Unite and respective safety technicians from each union will be part of the working group.

Europeans Confront Illegal Logging with Legislation

By Peter Ellis, Unite GPM national officer

Over the last decade, environmental and other groups have campaigned vigorously to outlaw the import of illegal timber. It is estimated that about £700m of timber per year is imported into European Union (EU) member states – about 20 percent of which is alleged to be illegally sourced in countries such as Brazil and Indonesia.

The European Parliament and their various commissions and committees have been debating the specifics and particulars of complex legislation, and received ‘positional papers’ from various interested parties, one of whom was the newly-formed Paper Industry Social Dialogue forum, set up under the constitutional guidelines established by the European Parliament. The ‘Social dialogue’ is between the European Mine, Chemicals and Energy Workers’ Federation (EMCEF), of which Unite is an affiliate, and the Confederation of European Paper Industry (CEPI).

On 6th July 2010, the European Parliament voted by

644-25 to pass legislation banning the import and sale of timber obtained through illegal logging. Under the new regulations all companies importing and selling timber or timber-embedded materials in the EU will be required to demonstrate that they have exercised ‘adequate due diligence’ to ensure the timber has been felled legally. The legislation paves the way for the new rules to come into effect from 2012.

It is worth noting that a report following a study conducted by an independent think tank, Chatham House, declared that imports of illegally sourced timber were down 30% from their peak in 2004.

As a result, up to 17m hectares of forest are estimated to have been protected from degradation and at least 1.2bn tonnes of CO2 emissions have been avoided. The report concludes that consumer countries such as Japan and China must follow the example of the US and EU and ban the import and sale of illegally sourced wood.

Workers Uniting Vows to Take on Illegal Logging

By Keith Romig, USW staff

Illegal logging is an issue that continues to concern forestry and paper workers on both sides of the Atlantic. At the Workers Uniting meeting in Pittsburgh of the UK graphical, paper & media sector and the US paper sector, workers on both sides of the Atlantic agreed to work together to confront this ongoing problem.

USW work in the United States has focused on Indonesia, not because it is the only place illegal logging happens, but because it has a large paper sector that exports to the United States and benefits directly from the un-level playing field, while costing US paper workers’ jobs.

In addition, US and UK workers have a strong ally on the ground in Indonesia—Kahutindo, the wood workers union—which is equally concerned with illegal logging in that country because it destroys good union jobs there as well. Other parts of the world where illegal logging goes on include Russia, West Africa, Burma, Brazil, and Peru.

Companies that do illegal logging generally do not replant, and do nothing else to repair damage in areas they have worked, causing environmental devastation in the forests. Illegal logging companies can undersell logging companies that employ union members at reasonable wages and benefits. The union companies are driven out of business.

Unfair Cost Advantage

Because illegal logs are cheaper than properly harvested timber, sawmills and pulp & paper mills that use them get a big discount on fiber, their largest cost item. This can allow such companies to undersell both domestic and foreign competitors that abide by the rules. In some cases, as at coated paper mills in the US, entire product lines and sometimes whole mills have been shut because of this unfair trade.

In the US, USW has worked on two tracks. It has worked with industry and environmentalists to update a 1908 law, the Lacey Act to also cover illegal logging. The legislative effort was successful in 2008, and supporters of the new law have been working with the US Dept. of Agriculture to make sure the regulations it puts together will allow meaningful enforcement.

In addition, USW and its allies have included in two trade cases on coated paper the contention that illegal logging is an unfair trade subsidy. In 2006, for the first time ever, US trade enforcers agreed. A second USW case on coated paper was decided in the union’s favor.

Workers Uniting will work together on both sides of the Atlantic to spread the word to members about illegal logging and the problems it causes, and will work with governmental authorities and other stakeholders to limit and end this curse.

