

More to Come

Canadian Steelworkers Fired Up over Job Losses

Fed up with massive job losses, Steelworkers in Ontario, Canada, are promising a summer of unrest.

It began in May when steelworkers in District 6, which encompasses the Province of Ontario and the Atlantic Provinces, occupied two manufacturing plants – in the 1960s peaceful sit-in sense of occupation – and suspended production briefly at a half dozen other factories.

And there's more to come, says District 6 Director Wayne Fraser. The province has lost 250,000 jobs over the past four years, Fraser said, "and we have a government that is saying it's not really a problem."

Organized labor intends to illustrate to the government of Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty that it is a problem, Fraser said. Actions will take place over the summer up until elections are held in October.

Frustration evident

"There is a lot of frustration, and the Steelworkers union is a fighting union. So we occupy the plant until the company sits down and negotiates with us a deal that makes sense for our members," Fraser said.

Not only that, in both cases when steelworkers occupied plants, the union convinced the companies to pay the occupiers a day's wages!

First, on May 3, steelworkers from Local 4752 took over the Hamilton Specialty Bar plant. Just 30 workers shut down production and seized the facility. A hundred others rallied outside the plant, honking horns and waving union flags. They had the support of District 6 and the Ontario Federation of Labor.

The bankrupt company, located in Hamilton, had announced that it intended to slash benefits for about 500 retirees, withhold vacation pay from active workers and deny active workers shutdown benefits when the

plant, formerly Slater Steel, employing 320, closes.

Within 12 hours, the company agreed to resume paying retiree benefits and to make the vacation and shutdown payments. "That was a victory," Fraser said. "But McGuinty's refusal to get involved was not."

Painful reminder

The workers hand-delivered to McGuinty an invitation to visit the plant site, which he declined. "For our members and retirees, it is a painful reminder that this provincial government does not care about working people in Ontario," Fraser said.

Twenty days later, steelworkers shut down seven plants across Ontario, six over lunch hours, but the seventh for about 10 hours until the company met demands.

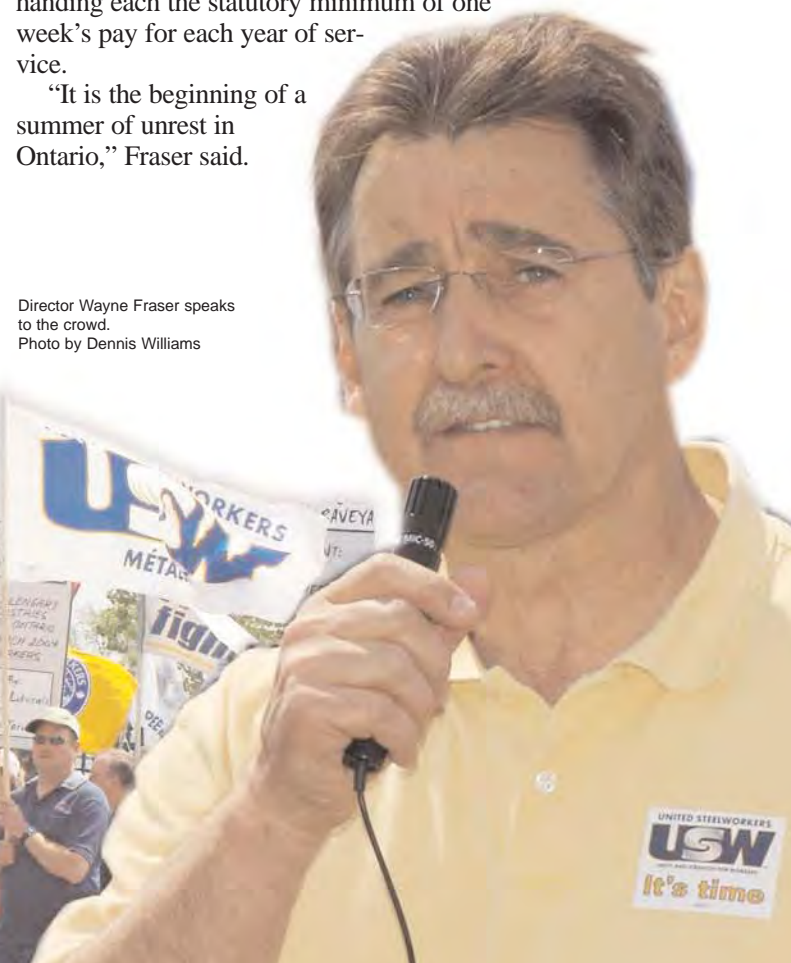
Workers at six plants boarded buses to Mississauga, where they joined their union brothers and sisters at the Masonite International plant.

Workers there had occupied the plant and shut it down. The others rallied outside, demanding that the company bargain in good faith over severance benefits. The door production facility is scheduled to close in August.

The sit-in ended when the company agreed to negotiate benefits for the 200 who will lose their jobs, rather than simply handing each the statutory minimum of one week's pay for each year of service.

"It is the beginning of a summer of unrest in Ontario," Fraser said.

Director Wayne Fraser speaks to the crowd.
Photo by Dennis Williams



Part of the tidal wave of change in the USW's national paper bargaining program is the formation of global networks of workers employed by the same company.

Kimberly-Clark (K-C) workers met in May with representatives of 10 other labor unions from K-C facilities spread over 10 nations and four continents. The Union Network International (UNI), an international union federation, helped them form a global network to represent over 10,000 K-C workers.

The new network's slogan is "A real global agreement for justice at Kimberly-Clark."

"Companies are going global. We need to figure a way to make things more even," said Keith Kovar, president of Local 2-86 in Marinette, Wisconsin.

Unite globally

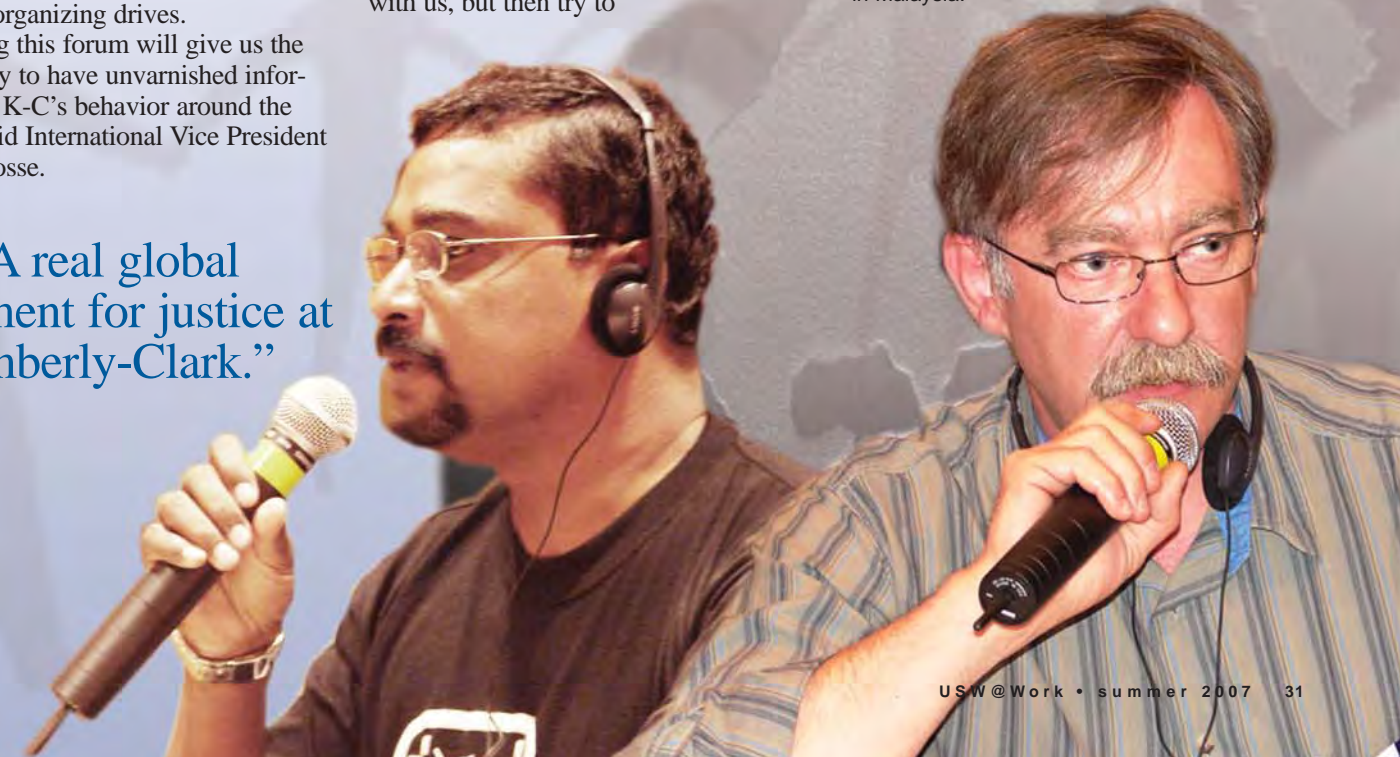
Workers must unite globally to fight the international race to push wages to the bottom, said District 2 Director Jon Geenen, who chairs the K-C council.

"The impetus for corporate globalization has been market saturation, and in too many cases the exploitation of low-cost labor and the environment," Geenen said. "The only protection workers have in this fight is to join hands globally."

Global networks allow workers to communicate with each other, share problems, offer solutions, devise strategies and act in solidarity with one another, especially during contract negotiations and organizing drives.

"Having this forum will give us the opportunity to have unvarnished information on K-C's behavior around the world," said International Vice President Dick LaCosse.

"A real global agreement for justice at Kimberly-Clark."



Workers Form Global Network

Seeking Justice at Kimberly-Clark

"The USW has a positive relationship with the company where it has contracts at the Mobile, Ala., Chester, Pa., and Marinette, Wis., mills and the Neenah, Wis., converting operation," he said.

Closings and layoffs

"K-C, however, has targeted its unionized plants and mills for plant closings and large scale layoffs," LaCosse said. At the Neenah, Wis., diaper plant, the company is moving machinery to other facilities including its non-union Beech, Island, S.C. plant, said Local 2-482 President Robert Ekdahl, who estimates a loss of 400 jobs.

While K-C works with the union in represented facilities, it resists attempts to organize the non-union plants and mills.

"The wages and benefits are competitive, but there is no doubt in my mind they would be union-free anywhere they could be," LaCosse said. "They resist with vigor any place we try to organize. It perplexes me. How can they say they want to work with us, but then try to

fight us in other facilities we try to organize?"

With the K-C global network, our union will be better able to combat anti-union behavior during organizing campaigns. A program drafted by participants at the global network meeting emphasizes labor rights and efforts to combat the contracting-out of union jobs.

"We intend to assist these unions, and K-C workers who want to organize into unions, to ensure their rights are fully respected, and a more positive culture is created at the company," said Adriana Rosenzweig, head of UNI's Graphical Sector.

The K-C global network's next step is for its steering committee to meet in the fall and together plan an agenda that targets goals for the network to tackle. Geenen serves on the steering committee and LaCosse is the chairman.

Below right: Patrick Bauret of FILPAC-CGT reports on the situation of K-C workers in France. Below left: Salman bin Mokti of the PPMEU reports on conditions for K-C workers in Malaysia.