

Niagara Regional Labour Council joins Vertis Workers for Friday's Protest

22 February 2013

A while ago the company that purchased the Vertis Communication's Stevensville plant in Fort Eire decided to close the plant as part of a corporate restructuring. The printing plant, bindery had been operating at that site for fifty years and had just completed a government subsidized lighting replacement project to improve visibility in the plant. The plant has successfully printed a variety of material and currently prints weekly flyers for two large Canadian retailers, Lowes and Seers. The plant employed 100 men and women in the printing trade, many with upwards of 30 years seniority. CEP Local 425-G represents plant workers and while in many ways they had a standard contract for the industry they had no early retirement provisions. Leading up to last week's surprise plant shutdown the workers were preparing for a wind down period of several months. Indeed the company had moved paper into the plant indicating it would continue to service the existing contracts from the Fort Eire plant during the restructuring.

One morning last week the workers were called to a meeting and told the plant was shutting the next day and were told to remove all of their personal effects from the plant, Workers learned that customers Sears and Lowes were informed of this at the same time and were offered the option of having their flyers printed in the US and shipped to Canada or seeking another supplier. The workers also heard second hand that the American parent company had no intention of paying the statutory severance pay they are guaranteed by Ontario legislation. Media calls to the Ministry confirmed as much. A spokesperson for the MOL, Gisele Rivet said the company might not have to pay the former employees. She explained "If an employer is formally insolvent, if they have filed for bankruptcy that employees wouldn't get what they're owed as a result" and that in that case "Bankruptcy and insolvency legislation dictates who gets paid first". Dan Wickson, president of the local said employees are owed \$2,3 million but because Vertis is American owned and filed for bankruptcy there workers will likely have to file a claim in a US court. He pointed out that the severance packages were needed to pay the bills while workers are seeking new employment.

Friday's demonstration was organized by a "roll man" Jim Callum, a 22 year veteran at the plant. He said it was difficult to get things started but then they just took off. The information picket was organized to inform the community about the injustice that was taking place. It attracted the attention of the Mayor of Fort Eire, Doug Martin and Niagara Falls MPP, Kim Craitor who both showed up at the picket line to express their support for the workers. Jim Thibert, general manager of the Fort Eire Economic Development and Tourism Corporation, also showed up and said that what Vertis and its consulting firm Alvarez and Marsal were doing "is wrong", "There's no way a foreign entity can come into this country and terminate 100 employees and not pay stat obligations". He then said his job now was to get a new employer into the plant. Workers said the company has already begun dismantling the equipment to keep it from falling into the hands of competitors.

Members of the Niagara Regional Labour Council, including members of CUPE, OSSTF, USW, CAW and IAM joined the information picket Friday morning. The NRLC will discuss how to assist the Vertis workers at the next Council meeting.