

Finland – Fierce conflicts and industrial action in forest companies

The employers in the Finnish forest industries have managed to decentralise bargaining to the company level in an unprecedented attack on national collective bargaining in the Nordic countries. This means that the central agreement in the sector is now history. After the expiry of the old agreement in December 2021, only negotiations on company level have been conducted and are still continuing. Tens of agreements have already concluded and agreed. However, there are serious conflicts and industrial action.

There are two main branches in this sector:

1. The chemical forestry (mainly pulp and paper) where the Paper Workers' Union and Pro have already agreed dozens new agreements on company level, actually with almost all other manufacturers than UPM.
2. The mechanical forestry (sawmills, plywood etc.) where the Finnish Industrial Union and Pro have signed several new agreements on company level. Moreover, the Finnish Industrial Union has managed to sign two agreements with UPM in timber and plywood sector.

UPM employs 18,000 people worldwide and its annual sales are approximately EUR 9 billion. This is a rare case of ideological refusal in a country with strong traditions for collective bargaining. In chemical forestry UPM instead demands negotiations with 5 different business areas for blue-collar workers. This is a conflict with the Paper Workers' Union and the Electrical Workers' Union. The dispute is actually not about pay rise as wages have not yet been accepted as an issue for bargaining by the company.

UPM, which is a major producer, still refuses to sit down at the negotiating table with its white-collar union in all business sectors. Essentially, it means that white-collars of UPM will be left to individual bargaining if the company gets its way.

Unions have started strike actions in almost all plants of UPM. These strikes will go on from 1 January until 5 February 2022. In response, the company has stopped collecting membership fees for the unions, something which has been laid down by collective agreement since the 1970s. The company has promised to pay 30 euros per day extra those continuing to work (as far the unions know, this has not been a success). Furthermore, UPM has moved some of the white-collar employees to the salaried employees' personnel group (professional and managerial staff) in order to deprive them of collective bargaining coverage. Staff who have accepted the transfer, have given up the right to strike.

These strikes are currently under mediation. However, at the moment there is no progress or any hope for that. This is totally ideological process from the UPM highest leadership with the purpose of undermining unions in the company.

In the mechanical forest sector, the Finnish Industrial Union and Trade Union Pro have announced a strike from 20 January until 6 February in the Keitele Group. In this case as well management wants to negotiate with individual employees. The dockworkers' union AKT has organised a sympathy action banning loading of all Keitele products in Finnish harbours.

More than 20 trade unions around the world have sent messages to the management of UPM in solidarity with the Finnish Unions.