

...Recalls at Freightliner not expected

(From Page 1)

to manufacture Western Star trucks in Mexico are on hold.

Machinists Representative Joe Kear said another factor in the decision may have been the discovery — during bargaining over severance benefits — that the company will have to pay larger-than-expected “legacy” costs whether the Portland plant closes or stays open. About 100 members have taken an early retirement benefit rather than wait for the plant closure.

The previously planned closure was to coincide with the June 2010 end of the Machinists Union contract, since the contract contained a commitment not to close the plant. Rescinding the closure means the company will have to negotiate new agreements with the four unions, which bargain together but rat-

ify contracts separately.

Kear learned of the decision to stay open Sept. 28 when company managers called him to a 7:30 a.m. meeting. The company wants early negotiations, Kear said, and a three-year agreement. There was no indication the company will expand production or recall any of the 1,000 or so workers laid off since 2007, except that Daimler has said it wants to put more energy into developing the Western Star brand.

In its press statement, the company seemed to signal it will seek concessions in bargaining. The company titled its statement, “Daimler ... announces ‘second chance’ for Portland truck plant.”

The choice of language — “second chance” — suggests that closure is still a threat, or maybe that Portland or the Daimler workforce have displeased the

corporate hierarchs, but will have another chance to win back favor, presumably by giving wage concessions and giving up job protections.

“The cost disadvantages of operating a truck manufacturing plant in Portland have not changed,” Daimler said in the statement, and “negotiation of a new labor contract to continue plant operations must focus on increased flexibility in work rules and cost reductions that lead to further gains in competitiveness.”

“We are hopeful that our discussions with the unions in the weeks ahead will prove to be productive,” Nielsen said in the written statement.

“We will do our best to look out for the interests of our members,” Kear told the Labor Press. “I think members will want to see severance language in the new contract.”

Unemployment rate remains above 12 percent in Oregon

Federal Reserve Chair Ben Bernanke may have pronounced the recession over Sept. 15, but hard times continue, according to economic indicators released in September.

Unemployment continued its rise, to 9.7 percent nationally for August. Washington’s rate was 9.2 percent, while Oregon’s was 12.2 percent, tying California for fourth-highest unemployment in the nation. The rates are from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and are seasonally adjusted. The statistic doesn’t count workers who have stopped looking for work or are working part time but want to work more.

As of August, over 235,000 Oregonians were considered unemployed according to the BLS survey, and as of Sept. 12, the Oregon Employment Department reported 164,278 were collecting unemployment insurance benefits. Of those getting benefits, 70,873 had been on the rolls longer than six months. Because of special state and federal extensions, a worker can currently get up to 79 weeks of unemployment benefits, but by mid-September, 500 Oregonians a week were exhausting even that, having not found work since early 2008.

Oregon unemployment benefits range from \$143 to \$507 a week, and

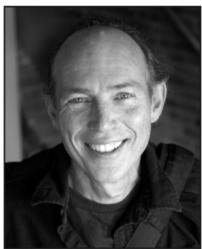
average \$313 a week. On that amount, workers are lucky to make rent or a mortgage payment. Insurance becomes unaffordable.

Union Machinist Victor Pierce was laid off from Freightliner in February after 15 years at the truck-making plant. By August, he could no longer afford the \$800-a-month “COBRA” premium payments to continue health insurance for his family ... not on an unemployment benefit of just over \$500 a week.

“I can’t afford to buy my son clothes for school this year,” Pierce said. “I can’t afford to get my car fixed. I’m taking the bus to get around.”



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