

# Machinists get first contract for Chehalis foundry workers

**Bargaining will resume again next year with Australian multinational Bradken ... if a 'decert' effort fails**

By **DON McINTOSH**  
Associate Editor

Workers at the Bradken foundry in Chehalis, Washington, have a first-ever collective bargaining agreement, 21 months after winning union representation.

"It's a pretty basic first contract," says Joe Kear, business representative at International Association of Machinists District Lodge W24. "But it has a lot of protections people didn't have before."

At the foundry, owned by Australian multinational Bradken, 98 production workers turn out heavy-duty metal products like ship propellers and turbines, pumps, and valves used in power plants and oil refineries.

On Aug. 10, 2012, the workers voted to unionize, above all to end an arbitrary and secretive pay system. Wages varied up to \$10 an hour for the same job, and new hires sometimes were paid more than the long-time workers who trained them.

## May 17 panel to focus on universal health care

A union-backed group advocating for publicly funded universal health care will present a panel discussion May 17 at the Oregon AFL-CIO's Portland headquarters. The panelists are University of Massachusetts economic professor Gerald Freedman, Oregon Center for Public Policy analyst Janet Bauer, and Oregon School Employees Association business rep Fernando Gapsin. They will give a presentation about the economic benefits of single payer universal health care for unions, low-wage workers and community groups.

The event is sponsored by Health Care for All Oregon, a coalition of unions and community groups.

It will take place 4 to 6 p.m. Saturday, May 17, at 3645 SE 32nd Avenue.

The new contract ends that arbitrariness with a set wage schedule that also raises compensation 3 percent overall and gives raises to most workers. Whereas pay was formerly a hodge-podge, now all workers are assigned to classifications with an established pay scale. Depending on classification, wages start between \$11.33 and \$17.49 an hour, rise every six months, and top out after three years at \$17 to \$24.50 an hour. Swing and graveyard workers get a 30-cent hourly premium. Higher-paid workers who found themselves at or above the top of the scale won't get a pay raise, but will get a one-time signing bonus of \$350. Lower-paid workers got raises to bring them up to where the new scale says they should be.

The contract adds some standard union protections, like no discipline without just cause, and a grievance procedure that can end in binding arbitration. To curb management favoritism, the contract gives more senior workers preference in job bidding, promotions, layoffs, recalls and shift assignments. A labor-management committee will meet quarterly to address production and other concerns. And members will get to elect a workplace safety committee.

The contract also codifies Bradken's existing workplace policies into a legally binding contract. The company will continue to provide health, dental, and vision insurance, short and long term disability insurance, and life insurance. Employees and their families



**A TRUCK-SIZED BUMPER STICKER:** A sign contributed by the Thurston-Lewis-Mason Central Labor Council rides around Chehalis in the pickup truck of pro-union foundry worker Darren Wright. Wright said the union election and first contract at Bradken are a big deal in Chehalis, population 7,259. Lewis County is a politically conservative and mostly nonunion area. Its largest city is Centralia, which has fewer than 17,000 residents. The area has been in significant economic distress in recent decades, particularly since the 2006 closure of Centralia coal mine. If Bradken workers win improvements through unionizing, Wright thinks, it could set an example for workers elsewhere.

will continue to contribute to premiums, and pay a deductible. Workers will get 10 paid holidays plus two to four weeks a year of vacation, jury duty pay, and up to three days of paid bereavement leave for the death of a family member.

Bradken wouldn't agree to a traditional "defined benefit" pension, but will continue a 50 percent match to employees contributions to a 401(k) re-

tirement savings account. And at its discretion, the company will continue to make an annual 401(k) contribution. Its 401(k) contributions have ranged from 1.5 to 4 percent of gross wages in recent years.

Members ratified the contract by 63 percent, though less than half the workforce turned out for the April 27 vote.

"We wanted a lot more than we got," said bargaining team member

Darren Wright, a lead molder who's been at the foundry 13 years. "But with the way the company was bargaining with us, it's probably the best we were going to get."

Bradken refused to agree to several common features of union contracts, including collecting union dues through payroll deduction and requiring all employees covered by the union contract pay union dues; instead, all workers become members now, but may opt out during a two-week period in October.

The contract runs through April 26, 2015. Kear said the union wanted the short one-year duration so that it could come back soon to bargain for improvements.

The August 2012 vote to unionize was a close one — 48 to 44. With no union contract in sight a year after that, workers who were opposed to the union petitioned for a "decertification" election, but the National Labor Relations Board put that request on hold while it investigated union charges that the company was engaging in illegal "surface bargaining" (going through the motions of bargaining without seriously intending to reach agreement). District Lodge W24 dropped those charges as part of the contract settlement, so ironically, workers could end up voting whether to dump the union even though they already have a union contract. The two sides are engaged in a legal disagreement over whether the decertification election should move forward.

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