

McMinnville rubber recycler goes nonunion

By Don McIntosh

Four years after workers at a McMinnville rubber recycler voted 34 to 23 to join United Steelworkers of America, they voted 32 to 14 to leave. The vote to decertify the union at RB Rubber Products—in mail ballots counted July 17 by the National Labor Relations Board—came despite gains in the one collective bargaining agreement negotiated with the company. The contract’s 3% annual wage increases outpaced inflation and amounted to a 9.3% raise during the three-year deal, while provisions on seniority and “just cause” discipline helped protect against management favoritism.

But USW Subdistrict 3 director Ron Rodgers said high turnover contributed to the decline in support for the union. Very few original union supporters remained after four years. At about \$17 an hour, wages are low at RB Rubber, which is also known as Ultimate RB. And the work is hard — grinding up tires and adding polyurethane binding to produce rubber mats for horse stalls, playground equipment, and other recreational uses.

“Those workers work their asses off,” Rodgers said. “They come out of there covered head to toe black from rubber.”

The union had begun bargaining a second contract, but a newly hired worker decided to gather signatures and file the request for a decertification election on April 14.

To defend the union, a June 18

rally drew 50 participants, including a strong turnout from union fire fighters in McMinnville. And Rodgers set up outside the plant one day a week for six weeks to campaign, but says he struggled to squash rumors that USW had said no to a company proposal for a 15% wage increase.

“I tried to explain: There’s no reason we would do that,” Rodger says.

“I was disappointed and surprised at the vote result,” said Bob Tackett, president of USW Local 330, the local that RB Rubber workers were a part of.

What makes the vote to dump the union more surprising: Most workers were getting union representation without paying for it. The contract with RB Rubber was “open shop,” meaning workers weren’t required to pay union dues. Most never paid, and by the end, only six of 66 workers were paying union dues.

“We’ll keep in touch with the people who wanted a union there and see how things go in the next 12 months,” Rodgers told the Labor Press. “If people realize their mistake, we’ll give it another go.”

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offices.

The regional council is further structured into Coastal and Inland divisions, each overseen by a vice president. Lance Deyette, who was a business rep at Local 66, is the new vice president for the Coastal region, which includes Alaska, plus Oregon and Washington west of the Cascades. Kolby Hanson, who was business manager of Local 55, is vice president of the Inland division, which includes Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska, and Oregon and Washington east of the Cascades.

SMART Ninth General Vice President Tim Carter, former business manager of Local 66, was appointed as the first president of the new regional council. Carter said the reorganization is a response to the problem of uneven level of representation for the members.

“Local unions are all in various stages of expertise,” Carter said. “As we elect our leadership, there’s always a period of time of learning. Sometimes it can take three or four years before you’re comfortable with the



job. Having staff employed by a council provides some consistency and a level of knowledge and training that serves members better.

“The idea behind a council is that local structures stay in place, but there’s centralization of funds for five locals, and centralization of oversight,” Carter said. “It provides flexibility so that resources from one local area can assist in another area, where before they were kept separated.”

Carter says his focus the next three years will be above all to protect and increase the wages, benefits, and working conditions of members by growing market share and bargaining strategically with employers.

Carter has been a member of

the union since he became an apprentice in 1980 with Sheet Metal Local 99 (which later merged to become Local 66). He got active in the union, and was elected as business rep in 2002, eventually serving as Local 66 business manager for six years, and ninth general vice president of the international union. He’ll now oversee the regional managers serving each local.

For Local 16, that’s Joe Harris, who has served as a business agent for Local 16 since 2016. Harris and Dustin Hysmith will serve three-year terms as regional council delegates for Local 16. New delegate elections for all the locals will take place in June 2023.

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