

## Salz Tannery:

Tanneries

# Whose Hides get Tanned?

PHOENIX

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**W**ages of production workers at Salz Tannery will be cut by 30¢ an hour over the next three years under a new contract approved August 25. Other cuts in the contract include cuts in medical and dental benefits, vacation pay, overtime and starting wages for new employees.

Exact figures and copies of the contract are unavailable to the public at this time, according to Patty Brady, personnel director and one of management's three negotiators.

The new contract was the final proposal put to the Leather Workers Local L-122 by management negotiators. Initially, management proposed a \$1.89 cut in hourly wage and benefits. The union overwhelmingly rejected this proposal and talk of strike sprang up. The union's initial proposal to management was a \$.95 increase in hourly wage and benefits. On June 30, management negotiators came back with a \$.60 per hour cut in wages and the elimination of cost of living increases. Union workers rejected this proposal also. Management's final package amounted to a \$.57 per hour cut in total wages and benefits. The union approved the new three-year contract by a 94-69 vote with 59 members not voting.

Dave Wenger, production worker and shop steward, told the *Phoenix*: "This contract was forced upon us. We accepted it to protect what was left of our [former] contract and our union and because of economic times. The next vote would have been a strike vote. It's a bad contract but we decided to accept, retreat, and come back another time."

Wenger added, "We negotiated in good faith and tried to meet their [management's] needs. I feel they didn't try to meet our needs."

The workers were concerned about the tannery's losses, amounting to \$500,000 during the first half of this year, emphasized John Anderson, union recording secretary. Anderson told the *Phoenix*: "The tannery took advantage of the economic situation and didn't recognize the needs of the workers. We would have taken cuts and/or a freeze in wages within a short-term agreement—a one or two year contract—but management insisted on a long-term agreement."

The union voted to accept management's last offer because the only alternatives were "to strike or work without a contract," Anderson explained. "Either would have been disastrous to our membership."

Norman Lezin, president of Salz Tannery and one of the company negotiators, told the *Phoenix* that he was glad that a strike had been averted. He added that management personnel were ready to take over production if the union had struck. Of the new contract, Lezin stated: "We are buying time. It's a lot less than we needed or asked for."

The *Phoenix* spoke to workers at the plant about their new contract. Pete Barrientos said: "I didn't like it. We asked for a freeze for a year. But with the company, only one way-cuts."

Of the wage cut and three-year freeze, Chato Alvarez said: "It's not going to pay the bills."

Robin Jackson, one of six women production workers, felt forced into accepting the new contract. Jackson said that if the union had struck, "hundreds of unemployed would have been crossing the picket lines at any wages." Jackson added that if the plant had been shut down for ninety days, it could have reopened without recognizing the union and all former collective bargaining agreements.

Voicing other workers' chief concern, Jackson told the *Phoenix*: "There are no other jobs at comparable wages on a year-round basis in Santa Cruz. Pay rates range from \$5.00 per hour for new employees to \$9.30 per hour for senior mechanics."

Production consists of hard physical and manual labor. Tanning includes a series of intricate processes to convert "fresh" hides into "finished" leather. Much of the work con-

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sists of loading and unloading the hides into large machines. The transfer of large loads requires bending and stooping as frequently as 250 times per hour, Jackson stated.

Back injuries plague the workers and have doubled in the last two years. According to company president Lezin, worker's compensation costs are more than double those of other tanneries. Lezin told the *Phoenix* that he believed that a significant portion of the reported back injuries were phony. In an attempt to cut worker's compensation expenses to the company, Lezin is proposing bonuses to workers of \$200 to \$400 per year based on the amount of savings in the compensation program.

One of the union's gains in the new contract, according to Wenger and Anderson, is that more overtime will be voluntary rather than mandatory. Another gain is that employees will no longer have to work more than two consecutive six-day weeks. Despite these gains, the union suffered a drastic cut in overtime pay. Previously, a worker received double wages for work over ten hours in one shift. The new contract stipulates the double wages will be paid only for labor exceeding twelve hours straight.

The new contract also stipulates an additional bonus of \$1300 to each worker during the term of the contract. The bonus is broken up into payments: \$500 in August, 1983; \$150 in February, 1984; \$500 in August, 1984; and \$150 in February, 1985. According to Lezin, these are guaranteed bonuses. But Anderson stated that the cash payments are not really a bonus, but money the worker has earned. Each worker is losing an average of \$1800 in wage cuts alone during the next three years, as well as any cost of living increases.

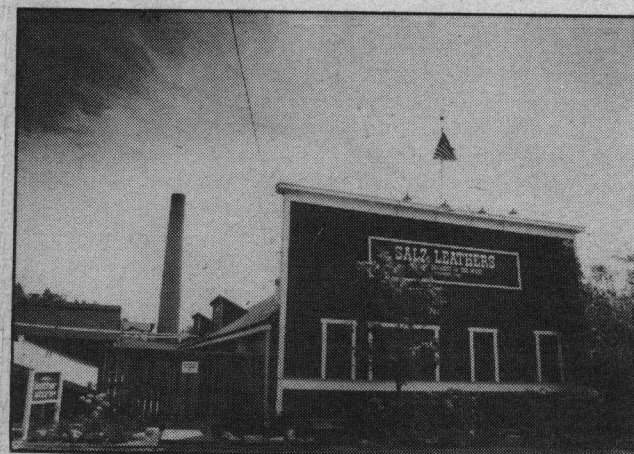


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Salz president Lezin told the *Phoenix* that an incentive and productivity-sharing program, called Scanlon, is to be instituted by the end of the year. Lezin hopes that the program will increase productivity and cost efficiency. Although the program is not part of the new contract, Lezin believes that management and the union can work cooperatively to institute the program.

Shop steward Wenger, on the other hand, said: "Worker morale is low at present and it remains to be seen whether the proposed Scanlon program will work." A key factor, according to Wenger, is how much control the union will have in implementing the program.

Despite the new contract, threatened strike, and union losses, production continues. As Jesse Chavez, a twelve-year employee, told the *Phoenix*: "I have to feed my family. I want to keep my job. We strike, we lose everything. I lose my seniority. I am an old man already. Without education, I can't get another job. We have no choice." ■

Karen Calhoun