

Worker unafraid of union threats

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Northern News Services

Yellowknife (May 22/06) - Joseph Boysis, an Ekati employee who crossed the picket line to go back to work, says union threats to reclaim his wages don't scare him.

After negotiations between the Ekati diamond owner BHP Billiton, the Public Service Alliance of Canada and Union of Northern Workers broke off April 7, the union threatened workers who refused to strike with legal action to recoup wages earned during the strike.

Boysis said he doubts the union will succeed with that.

"We haven't got any subpoenas," Boysis said.

"There's almost half of us (back). The feeling here is that the union is really losing momentum, mainly because they didn't have the support from the beginning."

He said 80 to 85 per cent of the mine's aboriginal workforce have come back to work - most of them from the Tlicho region. Ekati has 375 unionized workers - about 30 per cent of them aboriginal. Boysis is an aboriginal worker himself, married into a Tlicho family. He played a prominent role signing up union members to a decertification application, which is currently under review by the Canadian Labour Relations Board.

Boysis was criticized by two other striking aboriginal workers at the mine in an advertisement appearing in Yellowknife, May 5, for statements he made in an article.

He claimed the unions representing striking workers at the Ekati diamond mine misled workers into a strike vote in April.

He also questioned why workers were not allowed to see a second offer made by BHP before the union elected to go on strike. He said the first offer made by the company was not very good, but employees should have had a chance to review the latest one.

"We can liken this to the NHL strike," Boysis said.

"There's a bunch of millionaires walking around wanting more money (and) we're kind of thinking that the community is going to start thinking like that."

With respect to Boysis' claims that half the membership has returned to work, Regional executive Vice President for PSAC Jean Francois Des Lauriers would not refute or confirm these numbers.

"I have no way of knowing," he said.

As for the union's plans to fine members who have crossed the picket lines, Des Lauriers was tightlipped.

"This topic is not a matter for public consumption, it is an internal issue," Des Lauriers said.

President of the Canadian Labour Watch Association John Mortimer questions the legality of fining workers for crossing the picket line in a statement, in which he calls the PSAC tactic as a 'threat'.

"In an internal PSAC memo dated September 17, 2004, then-national president Nycole Turmel informed the union's national board of directors that she was in possession of a legal opinion that 'clearly and without ambiguity' concludes the union has no legal ability to enforce the collection of fines from its members in higher courts," Mortimer alleges.

He goes on to assert that Labour Watch is unaware of any Canadian court upholding a union fine for working during a strike, "Where a union member has appeared in court with a lawyer to argue the law."