

## Cargill, union come to terms on new contract

Friday, 23 February 2007

### STAFF REPORTS

Members of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1776 Thursday ratified a four-year contract with Cargill Meat Solutions.

Wendell W. Young IV, president of Local 1776, said the new contract covers nearly 800 workers through Oct. 9, 2011, at the 230,000-square-foot meat processing plant in Hazleton.

Young said the contract contains wage increases and improved pension benefits and improved health and welfare benefits. It was ratified by a 3-1 margin during two meetings, one Thursday afternoon and one Thursday night.

"In addition," he said, "the contract makes important changes in overtime wages and scheduling that should improve the workplace environment and quality of life for workers at Cargill."

Young said the pact provides for a wage increase of 50 cents per hour effective Monday and an additional increase of 30 cents per hour on Oct. 1. Wage increases of 30 cents per hour will take effect in October 2008, October 2009 and October 2010.

Young said the contract changes the practice of overtime pay taking effect only after a Cargill worker has logged 40 hours in a week. Under the new pact overtime – time and a half – will take effect after 10 hours in one day.

"This is important because the nature of Cargill's business requires a daily assessment of its workforce needs," Young said. "Our members arrive at the plant not knowing how many hours they might have to work. They frequently work 10, 12 and more hours a day without overtime because their weekly total does not top 40 hours. This new provision to start overtime after 10 hours a day will be fairer to our members."

Michele Kessler, secretary-treasurer of Local 1776 and director of its northeast Pennsylvania division headquartered in Pittston, said the new contract also introduces to the union's members a service provided by Health Advocate Inc.

"Health Advocate's professional staff members will work with our members to assist them in better understanding their health-care benefits and to help them address problems they might encounter in accessing the benefits that they have earned," Kessler said.

She added that the health-care advocates would engage with Local 1776 members on a confidential basis to resolve issues with doctors, insurance companies and pharmacies.

"We believe that when our members know more about their benefits and encounter less hassles using them they will be more likely to use the benefits, to prevent minor health care problems from becoming major costly problems, and to lead healthier lives," Kessler said.

Young said that Thursday's ratification followed nearly six months of negotiations that began in September 2006.

"In recent years, we have experienced the harshest bargaining climate in modern labor history," Young said. "The overall poor economy since the election of George W. Bush, coupled with soaring health-care costs and a national pension funding crisis created a concessionary environment for union and non-union workers," according to Young.

"Against this backdrop, we are pleased that we were able to reach agreement on a contract that improves wages, pensions and overtime provisions for our members." Young said.

The Cargill plant in Hazleton is the largest of the company's five case-ready production facilities in the U.S. and Canada. The plant's 1,000 hourly and management employees operate on two shifts to produce an average of 500,000 pounds of meat daily.

UFCW Local 1776 represents more than 23,000 members throughout southeast, northeast and central Pennsylvania and southern New York, including workers in supermarkets and drug stores, food processing plants, manufacturing facilities, nursing homes and Pennsylvania's Wine and Spirit Shops.