

NEWS STORY

Three-month Labatt drought ends Strike over. Brewery contract includes compromise on contentious issue of contracting out

IRWIN BLOCK

The Gazette

Thursday, September 18, 2003

Labatt Blue and the brewery's other top brands of beer should be back in bars and on grocery store shelves next week.

Striking Labatt workers agreed yesterday to accept a new contract and end their three-month strike, which had stopped production at the brewer's LaSalle plant - its largest in Canada.

At a meeting in Brossard, workers voted 72 per cent in favour of a new, seven-year deal, then many in the crowd gave their leaders a standing ovation.

The contract covers 650 permanent employees, 140 temporary and about 85 part-time workers.

Officials of the Confédération des syndicats nationaux, who replaced the Teamsters union as bargaining agents at Labatt, said the deal will boost average salaries, including overtime, to \$66,000 from \$62,000.

The deal was hammered out in a 30-hour marathon bargaining session that ended late Sunday.

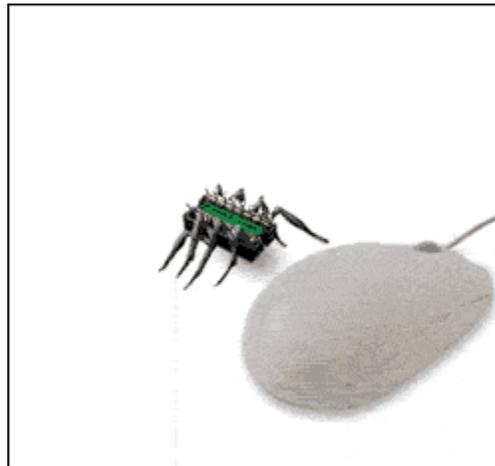
Under the new contract, a beer van driver will earn a base salary of \$1,138 per week as of Jan. 1, or \$59,176 a year. By Jan. 1, 2009, the driver will earn a minimum of \$66,456.

Temporary workers who do similar work will still make a lot less but about 20 will get substantial increases in becoming permanent workers.

A temporary driver, Class 1, will earn \$813.80 a week, or \$42,217.60 a year - almost \$17,000 less than a permanent driver.

The most contentious issue that kept the strike going was management's right to contract out certain work.

Initially, Labatt was only willing to guarantee 750 jobs for the duration of

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the contract, without reference to contracting out.

Under the compromise, the union agreed Labatt can contract out work as long as this does not lead to layoffs, or prevent the recall of laid-off permanent and temporary workers hired before Dec. 31, 1998. The contracted workers also must be competent to do the job.

The union was concerned broader contracting out would prevent 140 temporary workers, some of whom have been with Labatt for 15 years, from getting higher paid permanent jobs. Still, contracting out is expected to reduce the amount of overtime by \$2,000 or \$3,000 a year for many workers, said union president Robert Daneau.

The deal means temporary employees hired before 1999 will have first crack at the jobs of 380 permanent workers who are eligible for retirement over the next four years.

Union and management officials said they expect that initially 20 temporary workers will get substantial pay increases in moving to the hired-paid permanent class over the next months.

This will help eliminate the substantial gap between salaries paid to permanent and temporary employees who do the same work.

Diane Boulé, who has been operating a labeling machine at Labatt for almost 16 years, will become a permanent employee when she returns to work, and with the wage boost, her hourly wage jumps to \$27 from \$17.50.

Why did it take so long to become permanent?

"Our former union was the Teamsters, and they did nothing for temporaries. The CSN made this a priority," Boulé said jubilantly.

"Hats off to the CSN."