

LOCAL

MANUFACTURING

New Era Cap, union reach deal to end strike

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An agreement to end the 11-month strike at New Era Cap Co. in Derby came Tuesday after pressure from three U.S. senators, national labor rights groups and an AFL-CIO boycott.

Now the community 20 miles south of Buffalo hopes the battle can be forgotten and the rift between labor and company camps can heal.

"We're thrilled that people are going to be back to work," Town of Evans Supervisor Robert Catalino said. "It was a very painful experience for people in the community, workers and businesses - we were always worried we would lose those jobs."

The Communications Workers of America signed a tentative agreement Monday night for a four-year contract and halted picketing outside the factory in Derby.

The 330 workers covered by the agreement are set to meet Thursday to hear the contract terms, with a vote scheduled June 21.

Some workers said they are holding off their celebration until reading the agreement.

"I want to go back to work, but I want to see the contract before I decide," said Pam Plecher, a 17-year employee from Angola. Still to be seen is how strike supporters will take up their jobs beside workers who left the union and crossed the picket line.

"That's going to be a tough situation until we go in there and see how it works," Plecher said.

About 220 workers joined the strike, which was touched off last July 16 when New Era instituted new production quotas. Another 80 workers crossed the picket line, and 30 were out with injury or disability.

New Era makes caps for big-league baseball players and their fans under a license to use major league teams' insignia. It also makes caps for other pro sports and collegiate teams.



MARK MULVILLE/Buffalo News
 New Era Cap Co. workers who have been on strike for 11 months are expected to be returning to work soon.

The proposed settlement comes after the Fair Labor Association, an apparel industry oversight group, postponed New Era's application for membership last week for a third time, denying the company a stamp of approval for its labor practices.

Six universities have dropped New Era's contracts after a critical report of its labor record came out in August.

The settlement also comes after pressure from Sen. Charles E. Schumer, who urged Baseball Commissioner Allan H. "Bud" Selig to suspend New Era's production license. Schumer's April 24 letter to Selig was also signed by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy.

"It was a little bit hardball," Schumer said. But the tough tactics were necessary to break the deadlock, he said. "It was clear that the sides were eyeball-to-eyeball for the longest time."

However John DeWaal, New Era marketing director, said Selig didn't threaten the company with losing its license as Schumer suggested.

"We had quite a few politicians weigh in on this," he said, naming Sen. Hillary Clinton's office, State Assemblyman Jack Quinn and local officials. "The biggest factor was, we were able to come to terms that made sense for both sides," DeWaal said.

The agreement addresses workers' gripes about pay and safety measures while allowing flexibility that keeps the plant productive, according to company and union officials. Terms of the agreement are being kept under wraps until meetings with workers Thursday.

Schumer's arm-twisting was one of several pressures on the company that worked in the union's favor, union officials said.

"It didn't hurt," said Jane Howald, president of CWA Local 14177 in Derby, which represents New Era workers. Also in the union's favor was a boycott by the AFL-CIO and by United Students Against Sweatshops, a campus-based rights group.

If the agreement is ratified, the union faces the task of throwing its pressure campaign against the company into reverse, in an effort to win back the plant's former business levels and generate more work for members.

"We hope that our relationship (with the CWA) will help build our business across the board," DeWaal said.

Labor rights groups that have aimed criticism at New Era say a settlement will change things. "The strike itself has never been the focus of our effort at New Era," said Scott Nova, executive director of the Worker Rights Consortium in Washington, D.C. "But it's certainly true that bargaining in good faith and creating a mutually acceptable agreement is a good sign."

The watchdog group issued a preliminary report on New Era last August that was critical of the Derby plant's safety measures and labor rights record.

Labor rights and safety were also sticking points that held up membership in the Fair Labor Association, executive director Auret van Heerden said. Evaluation of New Era's application for membership will continue, but in a much less charged atmosphere, he said.

Based in Derby, New Era also has factories in Buffalo and Alabama, which were not represented by the CWA and were not involved in the strike. The Derby plant voted to join the CWA in 1997.