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Train union lobbies U.S.

By Sage Birchwater

BY SAGE
 BC Rail train conductor, Bill Whitton, just got back from Washington, DC, on a trade mission to lobby for an end to the Canada/U.S. Softwood lumber dispute. Whitton admits it might seem odd for a railway man from Williams Lake to be off knocking heads in a foreign capital, over a matter not obviously related to his own business of hauling goods from one place to another, but he insists there is a connection.

As terminal rep for the United Transportation Union Local 1923 in Williams Lake, Bill got selected to the lobbying team along with several other BC Rail UTU members, because BC Rail is so heavily dependent on softwood lumber.

"We've got 37 members laid off right now because of the softwood dispute. These are the first layoffs since 1982, and we've got other UTU members laid off across Canada."

For Whitton, the trip to the U.S. capital was a big eye opener.

"There are 435 congressmen and 100 senators in Washington and they each have 300 lobbyists trying to get their attention. And our views got heard," he insists.

He says he feels the U.S. government officials were impressed with the grass roots delegation from Canada.

"We are country mice and had to take our toques off."

The week long journey began November 7 when Whitton and Sylvia Leblanc, also a BC Rail conductor, flew from Prince George to Vancouver then on to Ottawa with six other members of the BC UTU. In Ottawa they spent a day meeting with members of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, and the NDP legislative assistant to devise a strategy and select several common issues the group could focus on in Washington.



Sage Birchwater

Bob Sharp, UTU Canadian Alternate Vice President, (left), Bill Whitton of Williams Lake, Brad Burrows, conductor from North Vancouver, and Georgia congressman, Marion Berry, have a chat in Washington DC during UTU trade mission to help end to the softwood lumber dispute.



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"We didn't want to put a position forward contrary to that proposed by the federal government."

Then the next day, Saturday, November 9, they were off to Washington.

"We had the next day off so I visited the Smithsonian Institute and a couple of the monuments."

On Monday, November 11, they got down to business with meetings in spite of it being Veterans Day, the US equivalent of Remembrance Day.

Because it is an international union, the UTU has its own three story building in Washington specifically to lobby government.

"Our local members pay just under \$2 a month for our international union. We've got 111,000 members in North America, and I figure I got all the union dues I ever paid, back on this trip. It was incredible."

It was from the UTU headquarters that the British Columbia lobbying team set out with what Whitton calls "seeing eye dogs", state legislative directors, leading the way through the maze of bureaucracy.

"It's who you know in Washington, and the UTU has incredible connections."

Whitton says the focus of discussion stressed how the softwood lumber duty is hurting Americans.

"We raised the point of off shore lumber coming in, boat loads of European lumber being off-loaded and shipped. We argued, wouldn't it be better for you to trade with us."

A healthy, more vibrant Canadian economy would encourage more sales of American products, and lower housing costs for Americans would encourage more first-time U.S. home buyers.

"We tried to narrow it down to four or five key points. For every job in the lumber industry there are 30 jobs down stream. There are a lot of American people hurt by this tariff."

Whitton said he learned something else too.

"You can't get a point across to an American by hammering them. You have to convince them it's in their best interest."

Now that he's back in the Cariboo, Whitton says his next job is to meet with the Williams Lake economic development officer and make a report of his trip to city council.

"I'm 50 years old and this is probably the neatest thing I've ever done. Not just observing the process, but being involved in the process."

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