

# Huge crowds gather as Kohler strike begins

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The first labor strike at the Kohler Co. in more than three decades began Monday with huge crowds of employees and their supporters marching outside company headquarters after union members [rejected the company's "final" contract offer a day earlier](#).

By early afternoon, the sound of cars honking in support of protesters was almost constant near the entrance to the Kohler campus, along with picketers cheering along.

"There's a lot of support, with people coming and going on the (picket) lines," Local 833 President Tim Tayloe said. "We have support from local businesses and unions from all over the U.S. The support for the UAW workers is there."

## **Union: Wage disparity a problem**

Among the major sticking points that's left the two sides at an impasse is a two-tiered wage structure that union leaders say has created significant pay disparities among employees performing similar work.

Union members agreed to the two-tiered wage structure in 2010 with the economy in the depths of the worst recession in a generation.

That system left about 450 so-called Tier B workers earning an average of \$12.50 to \$13 an hour, versus about 1,600 or so Tier A workers, who earn \$21-22 per hour on average, Tayloe said.

The UAW has proposed phasing that system out over a six-year period, and union officials have pointed to several large U.S. manufacturers, including GM, Fiat Chrysler and Ford, who have agreed to or are in the process of dropping similar wage structures as the economy has improved.

Kohler rejected the idea outright and has said it's hoping to balance the needs of the company to reinvest in its current sites with contract terms agreeable to the union.

Several picketers said Monday that they're fighting for future generations of Kohler workers, who stand to be hired at lower wages.

"This contract hurts me and doesn't give me any more, but I could be OK with it until I retire," she said. "I'm out here for all the future generations. I'm out there for them."

## **Wages not keeping pace**

The union is also at odds with the company's proposed wage increase that they say doesn't keep pace with rising health care contributions.

The company has proposed a three-year contract with annual pay increases and bonuses to help cover the increase in health care premiums. Under the proposal, Tier A employees would receive annual wage increases of 50 cents per hour in each of the three years.

Tier B wages would increase an average of more than 20 percent immediately with 40 cent-per-hour increases in the second and third year.

"I think spirits are high. We're optimistic," Mark Reiger said. "There is a lot of anxiety, too...I have a 6-year-

old at home I have to feed, and no one is getting paid out here.”

### **Strike creates traffic issues**

Kohler Police Chief William Rutten said about 150 union employees were blocking the entrance as of 6 a.m and preventing non-union employees from entering.

The practice snarled traffic as hundreds of picketers clogged the intersection. Luecke said tensions were running a little high.

“We ran into a lot of attitude from them, and that was uncalled for. All you have to do is show your badge,” she said. “We were swore at and given fingers, and that’s disrespectful. We’re out here trying to make it better.”

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