

Workers Unionizing At IKEA's Only U.S. Plant

Steve Szkotak, Associated Press

DANVILLE, Va. (AP) — Workers at IKEA's only U.S. factory overwhelmingly voted Wednesday to unionize amid complaints they have been paid less, injured more and treated worse than the thousands of Europeans who work for the Swedish furniture giant.

The vote among workers at IKEA subsidiary Swedwood Danville was 221-69, according to IKEA and the union that will represent them in collective bargaining, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers. The union said 312 workers were eligible to vote.

The National Labor Relations Board, which oversaw the union election, did not immediately release the results. A vote is typically certified in days, and the union was eager to begin bargaining.

"Everything's on the table," said Bill Street, who led the successful union drive in this rural community of 43,000 near the North Carolina border.

A handful of workers left the sprawling Swedwood plant several miles outside of Danville and celebrated at a local hotel, where their new union leaders encamped for the vote.

"I wanted to cry from the excitement," said worker Tawanda Tarpley, 33, who was among the union organizers at Swedwood. "We just want to be heard. Today we have victory."

Swedwood acknowledged the vote and said it would honor its workers' wishes.

"As we have communicated from the start of this process, we fully support the right of our co-workers to make this decision," Ken Brown, site manager at the plant, said in a statement. "We accept their decision and will work with their union in a mutually cooperative and respectful manner."

Street had listed a litany of grievances — lower pay than their Swedish counterparts, unsafe working conditions, racial discrimination — that was in stark contrast with IKEA's vaunted global reputation as labor- and environment-friendly.

The Danville workers assemble the utilitarian bookshelves and coffee tables that the big-box retailer sells in its blue-and-yellow big-box stores.

IKEA denied the allegations and said its own and independent reviews found the workers' complaints groundless.

"Swedwood stands for strong core values and work principles and treats its co-

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workers similarly, fairly and with respect, regardless of nationality, culture, etc.," Steen wrote in an e-mail to the Associated Press.

The plant is located in a region that has suffered amid the decline of tobacco and textiles, two pillars of the past economy.

IKEA's corporate conduct is guided by its so-called IWAY Standard, which outlines environmental, social and working rules. The 18-page document governs its corporate behavior in areas ranging from wages to working conditions, but also including lighting levels and water supplied to workers.

The IWAY standards say overtime must be voluntary and ban employers from preventing workers from associating freely and collective bargaining.

Workers who had not spoken publicly before the vote for fear of retaliation openly discussed conditions at the plant afterward. They said management didn't listen to them, suppressed wages and promotions and ran a dangerous workplace.

Tarpley said five workers had collapsed in recent days from heat hitting triple digits.

"It's a good thing," said Lynn Jones, 45, a machine operator. "There's going to be a bunch of changes."

Jones, who has worked at the Swedwood plant for three years, said tensions were high at the plant during the union vote.

Street, who had predicted a close vote, was surprised by the margin. He said what may have tipped it for the union was the heat spell, which he said workers had to endure without relief from management.

"It's not just what a reasonable person would do to another human being," Street said. "The weather was just the icing on the cake."

Despite the criticism, Street said IKEA played fair during the long union drive.

Street said the union would come strong at the bargaining table, in view of the vote.

"IKEA, you have a choice to make. You can recognize what we've been saying over the past three years is in fact true and then begin bargaining with us in good faith, or you can continue this fight," he said after the vote was totaled.

IKEA's selection of Danville for its first U.S. factory came with \$12 million in incentive grants and the goal of ultimately hiring 780 people. The last capital of the Confederacy has a jobless rate around 10 percent.

IKEA has 26 Swedwood plants in Europe. Workers at most but not all the plants are represented by a union or worker association.

The union victory was impressive in a right-to-work state and one with one of the

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lowest levels of union membership in the U.S.

Arthur B. Shostak, professor emeritus at Drexel University and an expert on the American work force, called the vote "a dramatic sign of a rising tide of discontent within the American workforce."

He said the widening income gap among Americans and along racial lines could fuel a new resurgence in union activism.

"These and other such factors have more and more workers persuaded that only a renewal of collective power, as from unionization, can begin to reverse a steady decline in the quality of their lives and prospects," he said.

An NLRB spokeswoman said the unionization vote was among the largest in recent years in the U.S. Typically, unionization votes involved two dozen workers, she said.

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