
S.D. Warren Company

Stories of Maine's Paper Plantation


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Interview with Ray Pineau

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Ray Pineau (interviewed at the Augusta State House, March 4, 2003)

- Gives a detailed description of strike support from around Maine.
- Most important was that he himself worked in Westbrook during the strike. A bucket was left at the gate to collect donations on paydays; the money was then brought to the Wednesday meeting in Jay. He describes how the strikers were respected, even revered, in the other mills like Westbrook. He gives several detailed anecdotes describing what he talked about with others while there, including introducing the 25 to 1 program, which he said off-tape actually got him fired.
- Don Esty, state senator, was a regular visitor to the Jay meetings. (Should follow-up with an interview.)
- Resisting “team” concept was definitely a topic of conversation.
- Overall, he gives the impression that interest in and support for the strike was very strong.

Follow up questions:

1. Did you address any meetings of any of the union locals at Westbrook, either when you worked there or while doing strike support outreach?

At Track 1, 1:15:

RP: Financial, if we needed mailings, or whatever we needed done; different locals contributed in different ways. Financially though, the Maine locals supported the strike quite heavily – a couple of the locals to the tune of a million dollars.

This interview I know is primarily for the Westbrook local. The Westbrook local on a weekly basis sent people up to the strike meetings, to give us physical proof of their support, and I probably think, for the majority of our members, that was probably more important than the actual financial support – is knowing that you were out there and that there was actually some people who appreciated it, knew the extent that you had committed yourself, and your families.

MH: Now, do you have a sense of how many people would come up, typically?

RP: Uh. No, I couldn't tell you that. You would probably have to ask Peter [Kellman], or somebody like that. But I did know at the time, Senator Don Esty [of Westbrook], the senator, came up on numerous occasions, as did some of the other representatives from uh, uh, people who worked in the mill who were actually, uh, were, uh, Steve's father was a millwright in Westbrook.

During the strike, I actually worked in the Westbrook mill, for a commercial welding company, the Maine state building trades hired some of us in, to work with them, and I was afforded the opportunity to earn some money that way. So, I worked in the Westbrook mill on numerous occasions.

MH: Well, when you were working there, describe your interactions with people, about the strike.

RP: Well, it was outstanding. What we would do is, present ourselves as strikers from Jay, to the members of the local. And, inevitably they would come over – the workers would come over to us and ask us what it was like. They knew we were out, knew that we were scrambling to try and earn money to keep our families going, tell us of the support they were sending up to the, doing the bucket drops sending money to the local on a weekly basis.

MH: What was a bucket drop?

RP: Every week on payday, they would have a bucket at the gate. As the workers either came to work or left work, they would leave money in the bucket. And that money would be brought to the local by different people. So each week most of the locals in the state would have someone coming to Jay to the Wednesday night meeting bringing money for the, to help support the strike.

MH: And you were saying that when you would go in the mill you would talk to people. What did they say about – did they have a sense that what was happening in Jay might happen to them?

RP: Yes. The reason that they would indicate, such a strong support is that they knew there was no doubt that what happened in Jay would be directly reflected in what was going to happen in Westbrook. I think in most cases, they indicated that they didn't see how we could win, with the political climate the way it was. But the fight was so long lasting, so intense, and it involved so many people from across the country, not just in the area. And I think that probably they sensed that, and they were a big part of it. And, I mean they felt [they were] part of the struggle, I guess.

MH: I see. Now, I know one big issue in your, in building Local 14's solidarity for the strike, was sort-of team-type concept, that International Paper wanted to reorganize work, and change some of the work rules, and that sort of thing, and I understand there was an effort in the plant to organize around that before the strike started?

RP: Actually, probably going back to prior to the Boise-Cascade strike, thirty miles up river in 1986, even before that, we took an extension on a contract because of, the corporation had already started its union-busting moves across the country. So, our local, and Local leadership in Local 14, and 247, 246 at the time, which was the Firemen and the Oilers local, started opposing a lot of the company policies as far as people writing manuals on how to do their jobs, and that type of a thing. And not only that, but we developed a newsletter to keep the workers in the plant aware of some of these changes as the storm clouds built, as we got closer and closer to our contract in 1987.

MH: Now, when you were down at Westbrook, did that ever come up as a topic of conversation?

RP: No, matter - Yes, as a matter of different working, team-concept, and I guess probably in 86 or 87, now that I think back, team-concept were the catchwords for what was happening. And wherever you went, was this erasing the lines of, in the plants, you have lines-of-progression, and what would happen, is these lines would be fuzzied. So, you no longer knew exactly where you were, as a worker.

MH: And so this was a concern to workers in paper mills elsewhere?

RP: Right. It was not just, of course, Jay and Westbrook, but right across the state. I mean it was noticed - and it was presented to us at the time by Jimmy DiNardo and the Paper Workers at this time, Jimmy being the Vice-President of the Paper Workers for this region. And it was noticed not just in our industry, but in industries across the state.

MH: Ok, so you're saying that Jimmy DiNardo, through the Scott Council, probably presented a critical view of this stuff to the union...?

RP: It had to, it definitely came to the locals from up above, because there is no way as workers, as workers that you would understand that there was something happening that changed your work roles, but not knowing that there was actually a national move by a corporation to do [this], or by a group of corporations, to actually do this. That had to be, and again I'm just saying this, it had to be presented by somebody more in the know than we were as workers.

MH: And they were presenting this as something you need to be careful about, to resist?

RP: Right. Right. Because there was an ultimate plan.

Note: here I ask him about Scott's jointness program.

MH: Now, were you familiar with the fact that Scott, under John Nee, was trying to, probably late, towards the end of the Jay strike, was trying to go in a different direction, with the Scott locals?

RP: Yes I was, because part of my job during the strike was to organize the outreach program for Local 14, and I did have meetings with the council in Waterville, the central labor council of Waterville, where Scott was well represented with both the Hinckley and Winslow mills at the time. So, there was definitely a move by Scott paper to, uh, to divest themselves of this heavy-handed approach. I don't really think, and this is in retrospect, I don't really think that their plans were to ever really get away from it. But their plan was to use a different approach than just a mass replacing of the work force.

MH: Did you have any dialogue with the Scott paper worker leaders about that issue?

RP: Yes, I did. The president of Local 9, which was Carl Turner at the time - he is now a rep –very aware, very sharp individuals, and I can't remember/going to remember his last name, Pelletier from the Winslow local. These people were well organized, and well informed. We did, there was nothing we could really add from Jay that they weren't well aware of. **They didn't know if their locals would ever be willing to resist to the extent that ours did.**

MH: In terms of taking a strike?

RP: In terms of taking the strike vote. They were more gearing to do something within the plant. Some kind of work stoppage, or work-to-rule, work safely – whatever you want to call it.

MH: Ok, but there intention was definitely to resist.

RP: Right.

MH: Well, I guess those were the main things I wanted to ask. Is there anything that you wanted to ...

RP: Yeah. As far as Scott, if this thing/the focus of this interview is Scott, I think the thing to remember with Scott is, Scott did not bring in non-union construction workers until well into the 90s. And, I think it was after Scott divested themselves of their plant, and I'm thinking more of the one in Hinckley, the SAPPI plant, the South African paper plant. So I would tend to say that Scott was the best organized – I work in maintenance – as far as running a plant, maintaining a plant, to make paper, to produce, Scott was by far – and I've worked in just about all the paper mills in Maine, Scott was the best organized to produce a product. I don't think they were geared to take on the work force the way I saw in the IP mill, [and] in the Rumford mill with Boise Cascade, and also in Champion when I worked in Bucksport. So, I sense that Scott kind of got dragged into this thing, probably hesitantly, I guess that's probably it. Where they didn't replace their contracted work force, uh, with non-union, it would make me think that they wanted to keep a certain standard. And I guess that's probably the word, and not going tot the lowest cost.

MH: They were more interested in quality?

RP: Quality, than cost.

MH: That's interesting. That certainly fits what I've studied about their strategy.

RP: I'll add, if you don't mind, I'll add this while your on, now that I've been, the strike's been over for enough years, and I've worked enough different occupations on paper mills, as a construction worker, and actually hired by the different companies, and had an opportunity to see this work, uh, team-concept, progress from team-concept to an ISO, and I really don't know exactly, why that is, but it, uh, all different

types of lines disappeared, even the international boundaries, disappeared under this new corporate maneuver.

Note: goes into long critique of HR's heavy involvement in "facilitating" – really getting in the way – work. Based on what is going on in the Jay plant. "Like leaches, they've kind of latched on, without actually producing [any paper]."

Discusses here the advent of the HR office:

RP: Its interesting, the more I thought about it, is the actual department, at least in my plant, I don't know about other plants anywhere else in the United States, but in our plant, the human resources department actually started in 1986 or 1985, somewhere in there, somewhere in the early 80s. Before that, it was the personnel department that dealt with the personnel issues. And then it went into this human resources thing, that was supposed to make life better for us. But actually what they did was latched into every single part of corporate America, probably all of the way up to the top. And there's no decision that can be made without going through these people, and these people actually don't add anything at all, never did, I mean, they weren't needed before this time, so now it's perceived that we can't do anything without them.

MH: How do they present themselves to you?

RP: As a facilitator. Like, you have to come to me if you want anything done.

Note: Continues with his critique. Good stuff.

18:15:

Note: the following is an interesting take on: the politics of Local 1069 vis-à-vis the possibility of going on strike, how the age of the plant made it uneconomical for corporate owners to invest in, and how the stench of the plant made it unpopular in the greater Portland community, thereby rendering it vulnerable to a lack of support in the event of a strike.

MH: I just wanted to go back to your perspective on Westbrook, given that you've worked [in paper mills] throughout the state, how do you compare the locals there, compared to locals throughout the state?

RP: It was actually, what was interesting about the Westbrook mill, is that, the Westbrook mill lies very, very close, to Portland. And the prevailing westerly winds carry any of the air pollution or the smell that goes with a pulp mill, into the Portland area. So they were not perceived, or that plant was not perceived as a friend of the Portland area, because of that. So even the workers in the Westbrook mill knew that it wouldn't take very much for the pressure of the surrounding community to actually close the mill. So they were under that all the time. Their product, they were a specialty papers mill, and their product was the standard for the industry, out of the Westbrook mill.

MH: You mean the best.

RP: The *best*. The absolute best. It was the standard. And the problem was, the mill, if you went down into the bowels of the mill, where they had the old paper carts, on the wall there was a placque that said 1858, or 1848, or something like that. And the paper machines were actually built, some of the machines were built right across the river. So environmentally, now, that's uh, you couldn't do that, there is no way that you could... I mean, you would flush a floor and there was just open holes in the floor, so that the water would go down into the river, so, uh.

What I see is that probably all of the profit and the resource that was made by that mill by Scott couldn't be put back into the mill because of the location of the mill. The money that should've gone back into to really making it, to modernizing that mill, with all of the new technology, because of its location, the corporation didn't do that.

MH: What about the character of the union. I know that Westbrook unionized much later than most of the other mills [in Maine].

RP: There were two unions, I believe, there was 1069, which was the Paperworkers [and the Pulp and Sulphite Workers], and they split into two separate unions, and eventually they were brought together, I think the one just before our strike or not too long, within a few years just before our strike. And that's what made them – they moved fairly well together, if I remember correctly, because they were one local.

MH: And [in] other mills, they were split?

RP: Other mills that had separate locals had a very hard time. I think you look for leadership. As a worker you don't go to work with the idea that you're going to be taking on your company. You're just going to work to do your job and go home. And so, to be able to control your workers on worker issues, it's lot easier if you show them one leadership then if you show them three leaderships, each with their little nuances, is I guess what I'd say.

But, Westbrook was – seemed very unified. But, they were always under the gun because of being so close to the city.

I ask him here if there is any other piece of how SD Warren fits into the state's labor history, and it leads him to comment on the mill's papers as producing the finest quality papers in the "craft" publication papers segment. He also describes the contrast between older plants like Westbrook and newer, more automated paper mills.

RP: It's just a fantastic, just to walk through it, historically, it's just fantastic. We used to do that, when we were working for the contractors we'd walk through, and go down through the catacombs. I did the same thing in Rumford, and I did it in some of the other mills.

MH: How does the, in terms of how its laid out, how does it compare to other mills?

RP: Because, uh, its, actually Rumford I should say at one point in time, was built very much the same way right across the river. Part of the mill was on some ledges, right on the river. And this mill was, Westbrook was the same way. Actually, the machinery was built from one bank to the other bank. And the newer mills, even take Hinckley, the newest mills, are actually built away from the river. So, gradually as time went on – of course water, the resource, was absolutely necessary; the lifeblood of a paper mill is water. And so, without the pumps and all of the new stuff, they relied heavily just on the flow of the river.

MH: Right, right, and they were probably laid out much more efficiently than Westbrook.

RP: Yes, today, today because of the technology of the hydraulics, pneumatics, and the computers, it's just much easier to do things than it was back then. I mean, if you saw the carts that they used to move paper. If a machine is rolling paper up, and the paper gets away from them and it rolls down on the floor, in those days, they had actually manual labor scooping it up, putting it in carts, and bringing it somewhere to get beat up to make paper again. Now, they have a series of pulpers the length of the machine, if the paper comes off, it goes right into the pulper. And it's all done without anything manual.

MH: And that's something you definitely don't see in the Westbrook mill.

RP: No!

Here he talks about the implications of automation.

MH: What about the extra layer of people who moved product around?

RP: Throughout the whole industry, it's less and less and less. And each time we have a move – in Jay, we gave IP a TIF [tax increment financing tax break on investment] back in 97, or maybe 96, and actually cut 38 jobs, and they put in quite a bit of money into one of the machines. And that seems to be, I mean if we don't understand that – we were told in the sixties when I went to college that there would not be technological unemployment, but the fact is: yeah, there will be. There has to be, because we were so labor intensive. Otis at one time, I think, hired 3000 people to produce 750 tons a day. In Jay, we have 1000 people produce 2-3000 tons a day. So, you're producing a lot more, taking the resource, making a lot more with it, and yet it's being spread out a lot thinner, I mean thicker, the top gets its money, the work force gets some of it, but the rest of it doesn't go into the community the way it used to.

We end the recording and he starts talking about some of his experiences while working in Westbrook, especially starting a 25- to – 1 program; he states that

management found out about and had the contractor fire him. He got a job the next day at another mill.

RP: During the strike I was working in Westbrook for an outside contractor, and it was during the Scott contracts, at that time, which would have been 1988, probably the spring, and one of the workers in the Pulp mill – we were replacing some flooring in the Pulp mill, and one of the workers came up to me and talked – they knew we were from Jay, there were a couple of us working there – and we got to talking, and he said “we’re having trouble with the contract, he didn’t understand what’s going on, and blah, blah, blah,” and so, I said, well “weren’t you trained in the 25 to 1?” Because we had a training session, the AFL-CIO had put on and the pulp and paper people had put on at the Civic Center in Augusta, and he didn’t know what I was talking about. So I said “it’s very easy. You just get your shop steward or an interested person, and one on each crew, and then their job is to contact 25 people in the course of their shift, with whatever information the union is trying to put out, to indicate where they are with the negotiations.” So this individual says, “so what do you mean? I don’t know how to do that.” So, I went back home that night and made up a survey. How you start the 25 to 1 is that you start a survey – do you like your work here? Do you like your department? - just ten simple questions. Then what it does, it gets the worker to start looking to the union for input, and also to be able to air some of their grievances and concerns.

And so I brought the paper work with me the next morning, searched him out, found him, gave him the survey, and I said “don’t be discouraged if you can’t complete the survey, because the idea is to get it done and return it as quickly as you can.” And by the end of the day, he came back with a completed survey. He said: “what do I do with it?” I said, “well, you can put it in the garbage, because you’ve actually done the entire job, you’ve contacted your people. Now you need to put the word out that you want to put out.”

MH: And did they continue with that?

RP: Yes, as far as I know, that continued. And that was Peter Kellman’s 25 to 1.

This is a very intriguing story. It describes a Jay strike leader infusing Local 14’s grassroots tactics into another mill’s rank and file. I should follow up with Mark Bryant and with Tommy Lestage to see if this became widespread or was an isolated instance.