

Kraft Sparks Anti-Government Protests In Argentina

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BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (AP) -- An effort by Kraft Foods Inc. to end a labor dispute at its Argentina factory has ignited a larger dispute between leftist groups and the government, as several thousand people marched to the presidential palace late Monday in solidarity with fired workers.

Kraft spokesman Pedro Lopez Matheu said the plant in suburban Buenos Aires reopened Monday after police enforcing a court order evicted fired employees who had occupied the factory 40 days ago. About 65 people were detained and 12 injured in the operation.

A crowd of laid-off employees and their supporters gathered outside the factory, backing up rush hour traffic for miles (kilometers).

Later Monday, leftists and unionists angry at the government for being left out of talks between Kraft and the Labor Ministry marched from Congress to the presidential palace. Riot police lined the street to keep the protests from spreading.

Labor Ministry officials say the agency had to comply with the court's eviction order. "We are in no way disinterested in the fate of the fired workers," provincial Labor Minister Oscar Cuartango told the Diarios y Noticias agency.

The standoff began in July when 160 workers -- mainly activists and union representatives -- were laid off after they briefly prevented managers from leaving the factory, which makes cookies and other foods for Kraft.

The union demanded their reinstatement. Kraft says the workers were fired for cause for physically blocking managers during a workplace standoff.

Cristian Abarza, who was fired after eight years with the business, said the Northfield, Illinois-based Kraft wants to do away with the protections that union workers normally have in Argentina.

"They wanted to quiet us so they could begin applying the 12-hour American work shift, employing agency laborers that rotate every six months, increasing production without increasing salary or work force, freezing salaries and all the measures that these types of companies apply," Abarza said.

Kraft, the world's second-largest food company, has said it has no plans to freeze pay while increasing production.

The U.S. Embassy released a statement saying that although it was pleased to hear

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the plant had reopened, it was not involved in any negotiations between the parties.

"The Embassy has been following the conflict based on our interest in promoting U.S. investments in Argentina which have helped generate jobs for over 150 thousand Argentine workers," it said.

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