

Union Seeks Meeting With Sugar Beet Growers

GRAND FORKS, N.D. (AP) — Union officials representing 1,300 locked out American Crystal Sugar Co. workers have mailed letters asking for a meeting with members of the sugar beet cooperative that owns the company as the harvest begins.

The union workers have been locked out of five sugar processing plants in Minnesota, North Dakota and Iowa in the company's first labor impasse in 30 years.

"We want to try to sit down and talk in a very friendly manner with the growers," union spokesman Mark Froemke told the Grand Forks Herald (<http://bit.ly/ps1TGr>). "We would like to get to a point where we can put this difference of opinion aside and get back to work so the farmers can get back to what they do and still get a good beet payment."

However, company officials said they are displeased the union is reaching out to growers.

"To us, that would be paramount to us going directly to union members and negotiating with them, and that is very much prohibited," said Brian Ingulsrud, company vice president for administration. "We wouldn't do that."

In five cases, the regional office of the National Labor Relations Board ruled that there was insufficient evidence to show that either the company or the union has failed to bargain in good faith.

In one case, the NLRB found that the company did not violate labor law by sending notices with paychecks informing workers of the company's bargaining position before the union voted on a contract. The board said that because the company had previously communicated its position to the union, the notice to workers did not amount to a violation.

Ingulsrud said the union's direct contact with growers differs from the company's attempt to clarify its position to workers.

"All negotiations should take place at the negotiating table," Ingulsrud said. "It's unfortunate that the union wasn't really willing to negotiate at the negotiating table."

No progress was reached during the lone negotiating session held by a federal mediator more than a month ago.

Ingulsrud said the company's final offer, which was rejected by 96 percent of voting union members before the lockout, still stands. The offer does not include a \$2,000 signing bonus the company had offered if the contract had been approved by Aug.

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1, he said.

Union representatives have indicated they are willing to resume negotiations. Ingulsrud said the company would return to the table if the mediator asked.

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