

Crystal Union To Fight U.S. Sugar Program

GRAND FORKS, N.D. (AP) — The union representing locked-out employees at American Crystal Sugar Co. plans to lobby against the federal sugar program in Congress, breaking a tradition of fighting for the program alongside farmers and the company.

John Risky, president of the local affiliated with the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union, said it is a necessary response to Crystal's strategy since Aug. 1, when the company locked out more than 1,300 workers at sugar beet processing factories in North Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa in a contract dispute.

"What we have done (in the past) is fought side-by-side with Crystal Sugar and their shareholders and farmers of Crystal Sugar in Washington and lobbied for the sugar program," Risky told the Grand Forks Herald (<http://bit.ly/wPfsuS>). "We lobbied labor-friendly Congressional leaders to explain to them what the sugar program does in the Red River Valley and elsewhere where sugar companies are established and told them it creates jobs and good-paying jobs. But right now that is not the case."

Risky said union officials plan to tell lawmakers "what Crystal Sugar is doing to the working class and the labor people."

"Right now, we don't have jobs," he said.

The U.S. sugar program's key provision is limiting sugar imports and propping up domestic sugar prices, making the sugar beet industry profitable. Brian Ingulrud, Crystal's vice president for administration and spokesman on the contract negotiations, said the union's decision to oppose the program "doesn't make any sense to me at all."

"I don't know why you would want to lobby against an industry that has provided you with good jobs for many years and hopefully will in the future, as well," he said.

Union workers at the Crystal factories rejected a company contract offer in July and also turned down a revised offer in November. The two sides met with a federal mediator Monday for a daylong negotiating session that yielded no resolution. No further talks are scheduled, Risky and Ingulrud said. Crystal continues to run its factories with temporary replacement workers.

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