

Locked-Out American Crystal Workers Alter Plans

Dave Kolpack, Associated Press

FARGO, N.D. (AP) — The daily protests by union workers outside the American Crystal Sugar plant in Moorhead, Minn., have become sporadic, and nine months into the company-imposed lockout, the only hint of the ongoing contract dispute Monday was a pro-union poster someone had nailed to a wooden stand.

On one side was written, "LABOR BUILT THIS COMPANY GREED WILL DESTROY IT," and on the other, "AN INJURY TO ONE IS AN INJURY TO ALL."

The impasse between American Crystal and the roughly 1,300 union workers it locked out of its sugar beet processing factories in North Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa on Aug. 1 shows no signs of ending soon. The company has been using replacement workers to operate the plants. Company and union officials met informally in January, but the talks ended with the two sides taking public potshots at one another and no further talks are scheduled.

Union members still firmly believe the company's contract offers have been unfair and are determined not to cave, but they concede the lengthy impasse has affected all of them and led some members to find work at other companies or in other locales, or retire, or even put off major life decisions.

Nathan Rahm, 30, said he was preparing for a lengthy career at American Crystal, which hadn't had a labor impasse in 30 years. Before the lockout, he completed a four-month class to solidify his standing as a process technician at its plant in Hillsboro, N.D., about 40 miles north of Fargo, and Rahm said he was planning to buy a home, get married and raise a family in the small community.

Now in his ninth month of unemployment, he said he spends his time travelling to meetings and rallies as a union ambassador, not "putting down roots" as he planned.

"I suppose in actuality there's nothing stopping me from doing that," he said of his personal plans. "But it's really hard when you have so much time and energy invested in what's going on."

The lockout has affected Renae and Lynn Fredrickson at a different stage of their lives. The husband-and-wife team has spent a combined 70 years working at American Crystal's plant in Drayton, which is about 80 miles north of Hillsboro. Now their retirement plans, particularly Lynn's, are on hold.

"This is the time we would have put the maximum amount into my husband's 401K," Renae Fredrickson said. "Instead we're getting behind. We're making minimum payments on the credit cards we have and using them for emergency stuff."

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"We were just to the point where we thought we were going to see the light and now it feels like I've taken 10 steps back."

Unlike workers based at plants in Minnesota and Iowa, Rahm and the Fredricksons do not receive unemployment benefits because the state of North Dakota doesn't offer them. Most North Dakota workers are getting \$100 a week from the union in strike benefits, about a third as much on average as those with unemployment insurance.

Some Drayton and Hillsboro workers have been forced to sign up for fuel assistance and food stamps, many for the first time in their lives. Renae Fredrickson said she became physically ill at the thought of asking for help to feed her family.

"I went to the food pantry the first time and it was just ... oh," she said. "I've always donated. I've never had to go there."

Becki Jacobson, a 30-year employee at the Moorhead plant, said she's luckier than most because her daughters are grown, she lives alone and has no car, motorcycle or snowmobile payments. She saved some money ahead of the lockout because she believes the company had been planning it for two years.

But the house payments are starting to add up, she said.

"I don't go out and eat anymore. I don't go shopping. I window shop rather than buy," Jacobson said.

The lockout started as many affected workers were nearing retirement age. Rahm estimates 20 to 25 Hillsboro employees have called it quits during the lockout. "A lot of guys decided enough is enough and retired already" in Drayton, Renae Fredrickson said.

An American Crystal Sugar spokesman did not return phone messages seeking comment.

The company said its original offer in July is a good one, citing pay increases of 17 percent over the 5-year contract and increased pension, leave and vacation benefits. The union continues to protest provisions detrimental to seniority and job security.

Ross Perrin, a mechanic at the Moorhead plant and head union steward, said the workers who still are around remain united despite the lengthy lockout.

"We haven't lost anybody across the lines," he said.

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