

# ND Supreme Court: Sugar Workers Can Get Benefits

Kristi Eaton, Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — More than 400 American Crystal Sugar workers in North Dakota who are locked out in a contract dispute are eligible for unemployment benefits, the state Supreme Court said in a ruling issued Tuesday.

The decision reverses a lower court's ruling that said the workers were not eligible for benefits from Job Service North Dakota because state law prohibits unemployment insurance for workers involved in labor disputes. Nearly 1,300 American Crystal Sugar workers in North Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa, have been locked out since Aug. 1, 2011, after their union rejected the cooperative's proposed contract.

Minnesota and Iowa workers had already been allowed to collect unemployment benefits.

John Risky, a spokesman for the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers union, said the ruling will mean "quite a bit" for the 420 locked-out workers in North Dakota.

"To be locked out by Crystal Sugar as they have, all these families without anything, most of them scraping by to put food on the table, it's going to mean a lot," Risky said.

Two of the justices on the North Dakota Supreme Court voted against the decision.

The workers' attorney had argued that the "labor dispute" language referred to situations in which the workers withheld labor, which was not the case with the Crystal Sugar workers who wanted to work but were locked out, he said.

Darren Brostrom, Job Service North Dakota's unemployment insurance director, did not immediately return a message seeking comment. He earlier said that if the court ruled in favor of the workers, they would get \$4 million or more in benefits.

Brian Ingulsrud, American Crystal's vice president for administration, said the company was not directly involved in the case and has moved on with new employees.

"It's a matter between the state of North Dakota and locked-out employees," he said. "We're moving forward operating the business normally and we greatly appreciate the new employees and they're doing a great job of processing their sugar beets into products for our customers."

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There are no plans for meetings between the two sides, Ingulsrud said.

Union members have rejected the contract proposal four times.

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