

American Crystal Seeks Workers amid Lockout

GRAND FORKS, N.D. (AP) — American Crystal Sugar Co. has begun advertising that it's seeking workers for its sugar factories, signaling a new phase in the company's lockout of its 1,300 union workers, which is in its fourth month.

The new ads ran Sunday in several newspapers, including the Grand Forks Herald and The Forum of Fargo-Moorhead, the Herald reported Monday (<http://bit.ly/soeXnd> [1]). The ads lay out the salary and benefits prospective workers can expect.

The lockout began Aug. 1 when the union and the sugar beet processor could not agree on a new contract. American Crystal has been using temporary replacement workers at its plants in North Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa. Those workers have been brought in through a company based in Minnesota.

Brian Ingulsrud, Crystal's vice president for administration, said the new ads reflect the company's belief that the lockout is going to last longer than it had hoped. Sugar beets are processed at the plants from early September through mid-May.

"We felt it was necessary to move into a different phase, a new phase, one that is more efficient for more of a long-term lockout," Ingulsrud said. "Again, we don't want that, but if that's what is going to happen, we feel it is more efficient to have more local temporary employees. ... The long-term goal, if this continues, would be for us to hire 1,300 employees."

Lester Bergh, a union member from Kindred, said the ads add to the frustration of locked-out workers. He said he also wonders if the ads signal that the replacement workers aren't working out.

"When I sit by the gate (on a picket line), we see the company bring these workers in, in vans, and we see people today that we didn't see at the beginning, that's all I know," he said. "A lot of those replacement workers were brought in from out of state and they are leaving because they want to go home."

Ingulsrud said turnover among the temporary workers has been minor.

Bergh said he also thinks a fire last week that caused a shutdown of the Crookston, Minn., factory stemmed from replacement workers who did not know what they were doing.

Ingulsrud said the problem in equipment that separates sugar from sliced beets was the result of a "malfunction internally" and not a fire.

"And it is not anything to do with user error or the temporary employees doing anything wrong," he said. "It's something that happens from time to time."

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