

## STALEMATE CONTINUES AS AMERICAN CRYSTAL UNION WORKERS REJECT CONTRACT AGAIN



The impasse at American Crystal Sugar Company continued unresolved, with the locked-out union employees rejecting the company's new contract proposal for the third time on Saturday. The union stated that 63 per cent of voters chose to oppose the latest offer. The union's first vote was opposed by 96 percent of the workers, whilst the second vote in November was 90 per cent against the deal. Mark Froemke, one of the oldest workers at the company, having spent 30 years of his working life with American Crystal, said that he along with his wife voted against the contract. They voted against it because they felt it was too little and not enough. "If you've been out of work for 11 months, there's wear and tear," Froemke said. "So there were more people that thought even though the contract is not desirable, that maybe it was something we had to revisit." "We know that give-and-take negotiations are the only way to get this cooperative back on track to productivity and profitability," the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers union statement said. "That cooperation has produced record profits in recent years, and, only through cooperating, will we be successful again." Union members further alleged that Crystal was trying to create a rift amongst the union employees. However, the company was quick to refute the allegations saying that the new contract was good and that it contained generous increases in wages and benefits. American Crystal is a co-operative owned by beet farmers and is the biggest sugar beet processor in the country. Crystal has plants in North Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa. This is the first time in three decades that the company is facing a labor dispute. The Union said that 82 percent of the 1,300 union members, out of work for almost a year now, took part in the vote. In a statement posted on its website, Crystal expressed disappointment at the union's stance, but said that they stood by their final offer. "It is a solid and generous offer that includes wage increases at a time when many companies have cut employee wages and benefits," the company's statement said. The company said, that in the wake of the rejection, it will continue to work with replacement workers. Following the strike, the company's initial offer of compromise included a 17 per cent wage increase over five years, provided it was accepted by a certain deadline. With elapsing of the deadline, the increase is now closer to 14 percent. The offer also had increased pension, leave and vacation benefits. However, this was not acceptable to the union and, company officials claim, they continued to demand wage and pension increases "significantly above" the final offer. The union said that the Crystal had adopted a rigid and unbending stance towards its principal objections that concerned health care, drug testing, seniority and qualifications for promotions. The union said that the company had univocally made it clear that it was unwilling to negotiate on any of these issues. The union in an attempt to gather sympathetic support issued a statement Saturday expressing their gratitude to "relatives, friends, neighbours and union sisters and brothers" for supporting the locked-out workers. "Your strong support will continue to be needed as we strive to reach a fair resolution," the statement said. It is worth recollecting that almost a year back, in August this year, following a bumper sugar crop, the company in anticipation of a strike by the union, in the middle of the processing season, locked out workers and hired replacements. The situation continues to be bitter, with no prospect of a solution in sight. American Crystal issued a statement saying that the "parties remain far apart." However, John Risky, a spokesman for the union said that the union is willing to debate the issue further, even though no talks have been scheduled. "The union's negotiating team is ready to meet with the company at any time and any place to get this settled," he said.

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