

# Locked out American Crystal Sugar workers reject contract again

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On December 1, sixteen months into a lockout, workers at American Crystal Sugar Company rejected the company's contract demands for the fourth time. Fifty-five percent voted against approval.

The contracts were previously voted down by 96 percent in July 2011, 90 percent in November 2011 and 63 percent in June 2012. Approximately 780 of the 1,300 workers originally locked out are left, as many others have either found new jobs or retired.

American Crystal Sugar's offer would grant it the ability to replace union workers with contract workers, dismantle seniority, redefine which workers are entitled to full benefits, and cut health care benefits for union workers compared with non-union workers. The company has offered the workers essentially the same contract each time. The company's vice president, Brian Ingulsrud, belligerently stated, "We have already given them our final offer, and we have made it pretty clear it was our final offer."

American Crystal Sugar is the largest beet sugar producer in the United States. It has three facilities in Minnesota and two in North Dakota. From the beginning, the company has been ready for battle. It contracted with a firm to provide replacement workers and have them shadow union workers to learn their jobs prior to the lockout. The locked-out North Dakota workers were never eligible for unemployment benefits, and Minnesota workers recently saw their eligibility expire.

While the economic downturn and high unemployment placed the union workers in a weak position, American Crystal Sugar started the lockout during a year in which it enjoyed record profits. Even with the extra costs of paying expenses for out-of-state strikebreakers, Ingulsrud noted, "Last year was still a very good year for us."

The Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers (BCTGM) union representing the workers has proven incapable of mounting any defense of the interests of its members. From the beginning, the union negotiating committee promised American Crystal Sugar it would remain "neutral" with regard to the company's demands, a position it still adheres to today.

John Risky, president of Local 167G, stated prior to the most recent vote, "All we can do is explain what we have to the best of our ability and let them decide from there." He made clear again that the leadership would not recommend a yes or no vote.

Union President Frank Hurt set the tone early in the lockout by appealing, in a letter to American Crystal Sugar's CEO Dave Berg, to the company's business interests. He complained to Berg that "one of the most productive and effective labor-management relationships I have ever known" has been "severely undermined." Continuing this tactic today, recent union ads in local papers proclaim, "Shareholders: This is fiscally irresponsible. End the lockout."

The union leadership also participated in the charade of seeking help from Democrats, who predictably responded with similar misgivings about the damage being done to good labor-management relationships.

In September, Democratic members of Congress wrote to Berg, urging him to "resolve the dispute fairly and quickly." The union's promotion of faith in Democratic officials is particularly cynical given that American Crystal Sugar makes significant political contributions itself, including \$2.1 million in the 2008 election cycle and \$1.9 million in 2012, most of which goes to Democratic politicians.

The AFL-CIO got into the act in October 2012, 14 months after the lockout began, by announcing a

toothless nationwide boycott of American Crystal Sugar.

The BCTGM union recently abandoned the Hostess workers in the face of the liquidation by Wall Street asset strippers. It is doing the same to the workers at American Crystal Sugar.

A meaningful struggle requires a rebellion against the pro-company unions, whose major preoccupation now is collaborating with the Obama administration in imposing austerity and wage cutting on workers.



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