

Union strikes Palm sugar plant over cuts in jobs, benefits, overtime

By Alexandra Navarro Clifton
Business Writer

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At midnight Tuesday, Yvo Montes de Oca left his regular shift as a mechanic at Florida Crystals Corp.'s Okeelanta sugar mill and joined about 120 other union members to take part in the first strike at the mill in nearly four decades.

"I'm here to support the young guys," said Montes de Oca, who has been an employee for 27 years. "I'm 69 and close to retiring, but what the company is doing is not right."

By mid-morning, under an overcast sky, about 380 members of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers Local 2152 were waving signs outside the South Bay sugar mill. The signs read "Don't outsource my job" and "Don't cut my benefits."

The union's nearly 800 members voted to go on strike last week. Union members, who hail from seven counties surrounding Lake Okeechobee, are protesting the sugar giant's latest contract offer, which includes eliminating 182 tractor-trailer drivers and replacing them with independent contractors. The company also wants to reduce overtime and insurance benefits.

"This company is more efficient and more productive with less workers," said Javier Almazan, union local president. "If they were losing money, I'd be the first to tell our members to take a pay cut, but that's not the case."

Florida Crystals, based in West Palm Beach and owned by the Fanjul family of Palm Beach, bought the Okeelanta mill in 1986. Company spokesman Gaston Cantens said the company wants to continue negotiating with the union and is required to under law, but has not been contacted.

Cantens said the job cuts are necessary to keep the company competitive, especially at a time when the sugar industry faces lower consumption and new competition. The proposed U.S.-Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) would increase sugar quotas from as many as six nations. He said the company also projects lower crop yields because of damage to sugar cane fields during this year's hurricane season.

"CAFTA and agreements like it will have significant effect on the industry," said Cantens. "We need to make the cuts in order to remain viable in the future."

Negotiations between the union and the company began Oct. 28. A federal mediator was called in last week, but the two sides could not come to an agreement. After Florida Crystals made its final offer, union members voted Dec. 22 to go on strike.

Andres Ortega has been a factory worker at the mill for the last four years. He says the strike has

been especially hard during the holidays.

"The economy is good and the company is doing good," said Ortega. "What the company has and the success it has is because of us, the workers."

Outside the plant, tractor-trailers driving by on busy U.S. 27 blew their horns as they passed protesters. Some trucks coming in and out of the plant also showed support by blowing their horns. But a pair of Palm Beach County sheriff's deputies said they issued several tickets to drivers who leaned on their horns for too long. One deputy said the tickets were issued for improper use of a horn, a violation.

Alex Clifton can be reached at anclifton@sun-sentinel.com or 561-243-6529.