

Union workers strike Sorrento plant

Walkout by 257 members of Teamsters local began after contract talks hit stalemate.

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Unionized workers at Sorrento Lactalis' South Buffalo plant went on strike Monday after contract talks fell into a stalemate and the cheese manufacturer implemented the terms of its final offer.

The strike involves 257 members of Teamsters Local 264 - about half of the company's local workforce of 520. The strikers began picketing outside the cheese plant on South Park Avenue shortly before 5 a.m. Monday. By late morning, about 30 pickets were quietly toting signs in front of the main entrance to the plant.

The strike, the first at the Sorrento Lactalis plant since Teamsters began representing production and maintenance workers in the spring of 1995, came a little more than a week after the contract talks between the union and the company came to an impasse and three days before the start of the Sorrento Cheese Buffalo Italian Heritage Festival in North Buffalo. Sorrento Lactalis imposed the terms of its final offer July 1. Contract talks had been under way for several months, the company said.

The company said its offer included a "competitive package" of health care benefits, along with improved wages and other unspecified terms that it said would benefit workers. "The union acknowledged that the company's final offer was made in good faith but refused to submit this offer to its members for a vote," Sorrento Lactalis said in a statement.

The Teamsters, in a statement, said the company offer included "inferior" health care coverage. Picketing workers also carried signs claiming that Sorrento Lactalis supervisors were doing union work.

Teamster representatives at the site declined to discuss the strike and said rank-and-file workers also had been instructed not to discuss the labor dispute with the media.

Instead, the union issued a statement. "Enough is enough," Joe Nowak, Teamsters Local 264 business agent, said. "This fight is for our families and ourselves, but also for the 99

percent of Americans who now live in constant fear of losing their health care coverage because they can no longer afford it. We have drawn the line and are not stepping back from it."

The Sorrento Lactalis statement said that production will continue at the South Buffalo plant, supplemented by production from a sister facility in Nampa, Idaho. "The company remains hopeful that the parties can reach agreement and remains committed to its long-standing tradition of cheese making in the Buffalo community."