

Colorado Meatpacking Plant Lays off 100 Muslim Workers

A meatpacking company Wednesday laid off about 100 Muslim immigrant workers who walked off the job last week in protest of the firm's refusal to give them time to pray during the holy month of Ramadan.

When Ramadan began Sept. 1, workers said supervisors informally gave them time to break their daylong fast at sundown.

But non-Muslim employees protested, and on Friday, JBS Swift & Co. officials refused to give workers break time to pray and eat.

About 400 workers left the company's meatpacking plant, which dominates this city of 90,000. By Tuesday, 250 had not returned, and Swift warned that those who didn't come back faced immediate termination.

"This action is a direct violation of our collective bargaining agreement," Swift said in a statement released Wednesday afternoon.

Greeley police were called as angry workers who had arrived for the 3:15 p.m. shift were given their layoff notices.

The United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 7, which represents workers at the meatpacking plant, said it would fight the firings.

"The workers weren't given enough notice to get back to their jobs," said union spokesman Manny Gonzales. "We don't feel this was a terminable offense to begin with."

The Muslim workers, mainly Somali immigrants, have recently flocked to the plant, replacing many of the 262 workers, mostly Latinos, who were detained as illegal immigrants following a federal raid in late 2006. Many of the Muslim employees who

walked off their jobs last week had been in Greeley only a few months.

One of them, 35-year-old Iman Ibrahim, left Boston for Greeley this summer because a friend told him about jobs at the meatpacking plant.

Ibrahim said Swift supervisors had shut off water fountains Friday evening to prevent Muslim workers from having their traditional drink to break the fast, and in one case a supervisor grabbed an employee by the neck, yanking him from his prayers.

"If I'd known there was a problem with prayer, I would have never come here," Ibrahim said.

Nonetheless, he had returned to work by Wednesday and said supervisors were informally giving time for the requisite sundown prayer. "I like working," he said. "We like to live in this country. We didn't come to cause trouble."

Some other Swift workers, however, were angered by the Muslims' requests for extra prayer time. "Somalis are running our plant," worker Brianna Castillo told the Greeley Tribune. "They are telling us what to do."

Non-Muslim workers complained they had to do additional work when Muslims went to pray, which devout followers do five times a day.

Aziz Dhies, a local nurse who represented Somali workers in negotiations with Swift, said he believed workers of all creeds should share in the breaks.

He added that Muslims had no choice in the matter. "This is not something we're making up ourselves," Dhies said. "This is something written in [holy] books that we have to do."

In its statement, Swift officials said the company was "grateful to employ a multicultural workforce and works closely with all employees and their union representation to accommodate religious practices in a reasonable, safe and fair manner to all involved."

Union officials argue that the contract allows for the extra break time.

"Many companies pay time and a half for working Christian holidays," Gonzales said.

"It's a different time now, and we should respect different people's values."

Source: Los Angeles Times