

A Kern County mining town feels hope leaching away

Three months after a labor dispute led the world's second-largest borax mine to lock out 570 workers in Boron, the effects are being felt far and wide. A quick settlement appears unlikely.

David Kelly, Los Angeles Times, 5-10-10

BORON -- Anyone looking for a quick bite at the Barrel better get there early, before owner Eliseo Sandoval heads to his second job as janitor at the local high school.

"They call and say, 'You want to work?' " said Sandoval, sitting outside his empty, barrel-shaped restaurant. "And I close up and I go because business is no good. What choice do I have?"

Three months after a labor dispute led the world's second-largest borax mine to lock out 570 workers in this small Kern County town, the effects are being felt far and wide. Businesses are struggling to stay afloat. Families are trying to make ends meet without paychecks and health insurance. There appears to be little hope for a quick settlement.

Throughout the day, Lynda Haynes shuts off the lights at her hardware store to save money. At the Boron Food Mart, Eddie Alwaw cut staff hours and no longer makes deliveries to the mine to avoid crossing the picket lines. F.O. Rowe, who owns the Emporium, a general store, says business is down 40%.

"People are barely hanging on," said Rowe, sitting in the back room of his shop as trains rumbled past. "At the moment there is still the feeling that something is going to happen. If it doesn't, I can see the biggest part of the town thinking they have to leave."

Many residents are asking creditors to defer payments on cars and homes. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 30, which represents the locked-out employees, holds regular emergency meetings to help those in the direst circumstances.

On May 15, doctors and nurses will offer free medical screenings for workers without insurance. And each week, donated food is handed out at the union hall.

"If it wasn't for the food donations, we'd be eating rice and beans," said locked-out miner Danny Haynes, whose wife, Lynda, owns the hardware store. "We are just getting by, just maintaining."

As the battle drags on and savings run dry, many are considering what had previously been unthinkable: leaving this tightly knit high desert town of 2,000.

"I'd prefer not to," said Beth Sparks-Jacques, whose husband lost his job in the lockout. "We have lived here for 18 years. I have five kids. My grandkids are here. Leaving here would mean moving away from my family and friends."

Like many others, the couple have been living on unemployment, which pays the mortgage but leaves little left for bills and food.

"We lost our insurance because it cost \$750 a month," she said. "It's been a very, very hard struggle."

Boron was built on borax. The dull, gray substance — used in detergents, fiberglass and flat-screen televisions — was discovered here in 1925. Soon after, hundreds flocked to this harsh, scorching landscape for jobs in the mine. The company paid well and offered good benefits. Generations of families worked there and job security was a given.

But times have changed.

Rio Tinto Minerals, the British-Australian conglomerate that operates the mile-wide strip mine, says it has lost 25% of the worldwide borax market and business must adjust to survive.

The company offered workers a new contract that included a 2% annual raise, a \$4,000 signing bonus and an early-retirement package. In return, they demanded wholesale changes in the seniority system, the creation of more non-union jobs and the right to make some full-time jobs part time.

Over five months of talks, workers refused to accept certain proposals, especially those dealing with seniority.

When they showed up for work Jan. 31, the gates were locked and replacements had been bused in.

Three months later, the two sides have yet to reach an agreement, though Rio Tinto said they were close last week.

"We made a final offer which included a \$5,000 signing bonus and an added 2% annual performance bonus," said Dean Gehring, the mine's general manager. "We thought we had a deal, but they rejected it."

Gehring said "conceptual" agreements were also made on seniority, overtime and contracting business out.

But he said disagreements arose over a proposed set of work rules dealing with a range of issues, including insubordination and discrimination.

Union spokesman Craig Merrilees sees things very differently. He said the company is behaving like a "bully" and keeps demanding more concessions.

"These conceptual agreements mean very little until they are written down," he said. "The company continues to impose its lockout and it is trying to starve families into submission. If they were serious, they would end the lockout immediately and put people back to work and reach an agreement in short order."

Rumors are rife among miners that replacement workers are doing a shoddy job and that several have been injured, including one whose fingers were cut off.

Gehring denied this, saying there have been no safety problems.

"We are producing at rates that are higher than last year's average. The temporary workers are working out quite well," he said. "But we still want our other workers back. There are some very good people who have been locked out."

Many of them now take turns outside the gates, watching who goes in and out of the largest strip mine in California. Replacement workers often wear bandannas or masks to shield their faces as they are driven in. Miners sometimes heckle them.

"Everybody wants this to end, but I don't have any concrete reason to believe it will end soon," said Karl Drain, 54, manning his post outside the fence on a blustery morning. Kern County sheriff's deputies stood nearby in case of trouble.

Rallies are regularly held outside the plant, often with thousands of union members brought in from around the world. Whenever they gather, they chant the same thing: "We want to work! We want to work!"

So far, there has been no violence but plenty of tension.

At Domingo's restaurant recently, a group of union members began arguing with plant managers who had stopped in for a meal.

"They said some ugly things to the company guys in the parking lot," said Domingo Gutierrez, who owns the restaurant and is Boron's honorary mayor.

Normally open and effusive, Gutierrez looked anxious.

"The mood has changed here," he said. "We just want this to be over."

Despite the hardships, workers show no signs of cracking.

At a recent rally at the union hall, about a mile from the mine's gates, Deonna Robinson talked about the lockout's effects. After she lost her insurance, she pulled her daughter out of cheerleading and stopped her son from racing motocross because she couldn't risk them being hurt, she says. Her husband, who is also locked out, may go to Afghanistan to work as a heavy-equipment operator.

"We told our kids that this is a good life lesson," she said. "Everyone deserves to be treated fairly. No one has a right to be bullied, no matter how small they are."

The town's young people have had to adjust to a lot. High schoolers who normally would be looking forward to the prom are focused on finding jobs to help their families.

"My mother always told me, 'School is your job. Don't think about anything else,'" said Kaylynn Clark, 18, sitting with her mother, Cheryl, and some friends at the Roadhouse restaurant in Kramer Junction, a trucking hub just outside of town. "I have already put out four job applications — including here."

Hoping to win scholarship money, she's also competing for the title of Miss Boron.

"I want to go to a college that is farther away, but I have to reevaluate that," she said.

In the lockout, Cheryl Clark, a single mother, lost her job driving heavy trucks.

"Here you are looking at Boron's best and brightest. It's sad as a parent to watch them go through this," she said. "My goal is to let Kaylynn graduate here, but I don't know where I will end up."

She is certain of one thing: The dispute won't end any time soon.

"If they wanted to resolve it quickly, they never would have locked us out," she said.