

Workers locked out at borax mines in Boron in growing labor dispute

David Kelly, Los Angeles Times, 2-1-10

The Rio Tinto borax mine in Boron made good on threats of a lockout, shutting the doors today on about 570 hourly workers after the two sides failed to reach a deal on a new labor contract.

It began at 7 a.m. as employees and their families showed up outside the gates saying they wanted to work, but were told they couldn't come in. Replacements were brought in to do their jobs.

"The last thing we want to do is hurt our employees, but we cannot continue to negotiate without a willing partner and we cannot continue to deliver on our commitments to customers with the threat of a strike hanging over our heads," Dean Gehring, general manager of the mine, said in a statement today.

Rio Tinto, a London-based mining giant with operations on five continents, has been negotiating with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 30 for the last five months. The company says it has lost 25% of its global borax share and needs to make changes to stay competitive.

The union is resisting proposed changes in the seniority system it believes would open the door to nepotism and cronyism and ultimately to breaking the union.

"They are locking out workers and telling the families they are going to take food off the table and threaten their jobs unless people agree to roll over and surrender their rights to the corporation," said union spokesman Craig Merrilees.

"To their credit, people are standing up and saying, 'Enough is enough. You may be big, you may operations all over the world, but the line is being drawn here in Boron and you will have a fight if you want to destroy our jobs, our lives and our communities.' "