Advent battling workers over proposed move

By Ron Newman

How would you like to be told some Friday morning that your employer was moving his company to New Hampshire, that you and all your fellow workers would be permanently laid off next week with no chance to work at the relocated facility, and that you will receive no severance pay?

Peter Sprague, President of Cambridge's Advent Corporation, had planned to tell his 600-person workforce this news today. But some of the workers discovered Sprague's plans in advance, and last Friday they filed a charge with the National Labor Relations Board claiming that "opposition to the collective activities of its (Advent's) workers is the only reason for the removal of its plant." Their lawyer, Harold Koval, hopes to force Advent to stay in Cambridge by seeking a restraining order to prohibit the move until a court hearing is held. And the behavior of the Advent management is rapidly emerging as an outstanding example of how not to treat one's employees.

As Bruce Fleisher, a 27-year-old assembler from Dorchester, puts it, "We've been hearing rumors for two or three months that the company wanted to move. Things got so hot and heavy that we started to investigate." After investigating several late tips, another worker, Peter Olney, visited a construction site in Portsmouth, NH and, in his words, "right on the blueprints was written the name Advent Corp." The new 100,000-square-foot plant had apparently been under construction for almost two months before Olney discovered it on January 16.

The next day, Olney and several other workers published a special edition of their shop newsletter, On the Line, challenging Sprague to explain his actions to the workers at a meeting in the company cafeteria on January 19. That meeting soon became an angry confrontation in which Sprague told the workers that they could not work at the new plant in New Hampshire because he had promised to hire local residents there.

Sprague's reasons for moving are hard to pin down, because he seems to tell different people different things. The Cambridge Chronicle reported last month that Sprague's motivations are "economistic," while the Herald American quotes Sprague as saying, "The community is incredibly hospitable to business. They have asked dealers to boycott our products and they have lied in their releases about poisonous fumes." The Cambridgeport Almanac, a coalition of seven community groups in the Cambridge area, will investigate further.

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