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Hundreds, All Nonunion, Walk Out at Pork Plant in N.C.

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

In a move highly unusual for nonunion workers, more than 500 employees walked out yesterday at the Smithfield Packing Company's hog-killing plant in Tar Heel, N.C., the largest pork-processing plant in the world.

Workers involved in the walkout said it was fueled by anger over Smithfield's recent decision to fire several dozen immigrants who the company said had presented false Social Security numbers in applying for a job.

Several of the workers said their action had largely crippled production at the plant, which employs 5,500 people and slaughters 32,000 hogs a day. But Smithfield officials said production had merely been slowed a little.

The walkout coincided with a big push by the United Food and Commercial Workers to unionize the Smithfield employees in Tar Heel, about two-thirds of them Hispanic immigrants. A number of workers said the discontent stemmed not just from the recent firings but also from brusque treatment, the speed of the production line and widespread injuries.

"They were tired of the working conditions," said Gene Bruskin, director of the union's organizing drive. "They want a permanent solution to the problems there."

Mr. Bruskin said the walkout had been organized by the plant's immigrant workers and not by the union. But Dennis Pittman, a Smithfield spokesman, maintained that it had been carried out in close cooperation with the union, as a way of pressuring the company to halt its fight against organizing efforts.

Mr. Pittman said 350 workers had walked out during the morning shift, and 200 during the afternoon shift. But several employees involved put the number at about 700 on the morning shift and some 500 on the afternoon shift.

Several weeks ago Smithfield Packing, a subsidiary of Smithfield Foods Inc., sent hundreds of workers "no-match letters," notifying them that the name and Social Security number they had given the company did not match records of the Social Security Administration. In recent days, the company began firing those who were unable to explain the discrepancies.

Eduardo Pena, an organizer for the union, said some of the letters had gone to employees who had valid Social Security numbers, and several workers said yesterday that they would not return to work until Smithfield pledged not to fire any more immigrants over the issue.

But the government has threatened to fine companies that knowingly continue to employ illegal immigrants, and Mr. Pittman said: "If Smithfield were to do what the union is calling for, we would be breaking federal law by knowingly employing undocumented workers. The union should stop trying to pressure Smithfield to break the law."

One of those engaged in the walkout, Keith Ludlum, who is paid \$11 an hour to herd hogs to slaughter, said the workers were concerned about far more than the immigration matter.

“They’re asking for the company to allow us to have a union contract,” Mr. Ludlum said, “and to respect workers’ rights and to respect workers in general.”

Hundreds of workers milled in front of the plant for much of the day. In an effort to ease the dispute and restore full operations there, the workers’ leaders and Smithfield officials exchanged tense, on-again, off-again feelers.