

Want ad stirs up labor tension

A high-profile approach was taken to the hiring of replacements in case of a strike at a N.J. food center.

By Troy Graham

INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

An unusual advertisement appeared last weekend on the front of the Sunday Jobs section of The Inquirer.

U.S. Foodservice, a giant food-distribution company, said it was seeking replacement workers to fill a variety of jobs at its Swedesboro facility “due to the possibility of a strike” by its Teamsters-represented employees.

The half-page color advertisement promised excellent wages and benefits, and asked applicants to apply online but not in person.

While it is not uncommon for

companies in the throes of difficult labor negotiations to seek replacement workers, the size and specificity of the advertisement were unorthodox, a labor expert said.

Adrienne Eaton, a professor and chair at the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations, said that the advertisement was “not typical” and that it “sends a message to the union.”

“It may be that, in the end, they won’t use replacements,” she said. “But they’re saying, ‘We intend to keep operating.’”

John Laigaie, the president of Teamsters Local 628, which represents 275 truck drivers,

mechanics, janitors, and other employees at the facility, said the advertisement was “bad-faith bargaining.”

“It’s an obvious attempt to intimidate the members,” he said. “The company’s acting like a corporate bully.”

Kevin Hagan, a spokesman for U.S. Foodservice, said the advertisement was merely a “precaution” in the event of a strike. The Teamsters’ contract expires tomorrow, he said.

“The company feels very strongly that our first priority is to our customers,” he said.

Companies have had no problems finding replacement workers in recent years, Eaton said,

and unions now often avoid strikes for fear of being replaced.

The current economic climate only makes it easier to find replacements. “There’s plenty of unemployed people to go around,” Eaton said.

Laigaie and Hagan said their respective sides were hopeful they could resolve their issues at the bargaining table. Their next negotiation session was set for tomorrow, Laigaie said.

He also said the union had “never once threatened a strike,” though the members did vote unanimously Sunday to authorize a strike.

Laigaie said many issues

remained on the table, but “the biggest issue is job security at the site.” He said the company, based in Illinois, had asked to “move some work out.”

Hagan said the company was “committed to reaching an agreement” with the union.

But Laigaie said members had noted the advertisement, and “solidarity has magnified immensely.”

“All along, we haven’t said one bad word about this company,” Laigaie said. “Don’t bully people. That’s ridiculous.”

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