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## Gunite plans for temp workers before labor talks

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**By Nate Legue**

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**ROCKFORD -**

The oldest manufacturing company in town wants to build on-site bunkhouses for replacement workers as its contract with union laborers nears its end.

But [Gunite](#) Corp.'s zoning request for up to 10 sleeping trailers with space for 96 temporary workers faces steep obstacles after a cool reception earlier this month from the Rockford Zoning Board of Appeals.

Gunite's representatives told the city that they needed a contingency plan for maintaining production if the United Auto Workers Local 718 strikes when its contract expires Nov. 17.

"While we don't anticipate that there will be a strike, we feel that preparing for that possibility is prudent and will assure that we are able to meet our customer needs," said Eva Schmitz, spokesman of Evansville, Ind.-based [Accuride Corp.](#), Gunite's corporate parent.

But Local 718 president Rick Kardell called the proposal a "scare tactic" intended to intimidate the union's 136 members. The union and Accuride's labor attorneys are hoping to begin contract discussions around Oct. 10.

"This is just protocol for Accuride; this is just what they do before they come up to negotiations," Kardell said. The company brought stacks of cots into the foundry two and a half years ago before the last contract expired, Kardell said.

In the past 20 years, the union has gone on strike twice at the Rockford foundry, Schmitz said. In 1998, a walkout lasted more than two weeks as workers protested the wage and hours provisions in an offer from then-owner Johnstown America Industries Inc. Picketing workers cited poor morale at the foundry before ratifying a contract that included hiring an outside consultant to improve relations with labor and management.

While hiring replacement workers during a strike is not uncommon, building temporary on-site housing for them hearkens back to a more volatile era of labor relations.

As recently as 1989, labor supporters and contract workers clashed at a northern Minnesota construction site in a wildcat strike that drew national headlines. Boise Cascade was expanding its International Falls paper mill with a non-union Alabama-based contractor who brought in hundreds of southern workers to live in a camp outside the site. Tensions ran high in the small town until about 400 union supporters stormed the camp and burned it to the ground.

But erecting housing for replacements is rare and such spartan accommodations are not attractive to workers, said Professor Peter Feuille, former director of the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations at the University of Illinois.

“This sounds to me like gamesmanship,” Feuille said. “Even sort of working backward up to the present, is the company really serious about this zoning request, and do they really expect the city to approve it?”

In a report, city staff expressed concern about the lack of bathroom or shower facilities in the trailers; workers would have to walk inside the plant to use them. The average temperature in Rockford last November was 41 degrees. On Sept. 18, the Zoning Board of Appeals heard from 11 objectors to the petition — nine of them Gunitite employees — and unanimously recommended denial.

On Monday, the request for the special use permit will be considered by the Code and Regulation Committee, but will need a two-thirds majority of the City Council to gain approval.

“It got shot down big time on ZBA, and I don’t foresee it getting anywhere in Code and Regs or the City Council,” said Ald. Dan Conness. “I don’t think it took long to shoot it down; there wasn’t even much debate.”

Accuride has made similar contingency plans at other plants when union contracts wind down, Schmitz said. Accuride owns several companies that make steel and aluminum parts for big rigs, including Gunitite, which makes brakes and wheel-end assemblies for heavy-duty trucks.

“We feel it would be irresponsible for us to disregard the needs of our customers and to not take steps to preserve the jobs of the employees should they call a strike,” Schmitz said.

If the two sides start bargaining Oct. 10, they’ll have a little over five weeks to write a new contract. Workplace safety issues will likely be a priority, Kardell said. The union decried workplace conditions after a floor collapsed at the foundry in January, leaving a worker stranded at his machine.

“We’re going to be crunched for time,” Kardell said.

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