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## Fresh&Easy suppliers' workers expected to cast union vote

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By JACK KATZANEK  
The Press-Enterprise

Some 180 workers at a Riverside food processing facility that provides meat for Fresh & Easy stores will vote Friday on whether to join the nation's largest grocery workers union.

But the election has already become complicated because supervisors at United Kingdom-based 2 Sisters Food Group are accused of conducting surveillance on employees, interrogating workers about union activities and attempting to coerce them into voting against the United Food and Commercial Workers. Several workers were allegedly fired because of their union activities, according to federal documents.

The election will be held throughout the day Friday at the 2 Sisters facility at the Meridian Business Park, said James Small, director of Region 21 of the National Labor Relations Board, which will supervise the balloting. The labor board is also holding hearings on the allegations against the 2 Sisters supervisors.

2 Sisters is an independent company that came to the United States at about the same time as Fresh & Easy, which it also supplies in Europe, and 2 Sisters opened its processing plant - its only American facility - near Fresh & Easy's 800,000-square-foot distribution center in Riverside.

Joe Duffie, an organizer with Bloomington-based Local 1167 of UFCW, said 2 Sisters relationship with Fresh & Easy had no bearing on the union's campaign. Fresh & Easy is a nonunion chain that competes with Vons, Ralphs, Albertsons and Stater Bros., all of which are represented by UFCW. There are about 15 Fresh & Easy locations in Inland Southern California.

Duffie said UFCW wants to look at all the new players in the food industry, and thought 2 Sisters might be amenable because its work force in Britain is unionized. So far, he said, the firm's management has not been receptive. Workers in Riverside make about \$9 or \$10 an hour, he said.

"We've heard rumors their workers in the UK get \$20 or \$25 an hour, with five weeks' vacation," Duffie said. "You'd think people could at least get something close to that in this country."

Jeremy Chew, chief executive officer at 2 Sisters, said that was not an accurate statement, and that comparisons between American and British pay scales should not be made.

Chew said he would have no problem if the workers voted to unionize.

"Our employees will make their own choice, and we'll stand by it," Chew said.

The union initially filed unfair labor practices charges with the labor board last summer, not long after the union began its organizing efforts. Chew declined to comment on the charges, citing the ongoing hearings.

Labor board spokesman Small said it was unclear when the hearings, which have already started at more than one location, would be concluded. He said scheduling issues could push the conclusion as far back as September.

However, Small said that unless either party filed an amendment to the charges, Friday's election would go forward.

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