By Steve Share, Labor Review editor

NEW BRIGHTON — As a driver backed a semi-trailer into the loading dock at the Finish Line Express freight terminal, a crowd of about 100 Teamsters Local 120 members and supporters had just wrapped up a protest rally outside the terminal on the other side of a chain-link fence.

"He won't even look over here," said Jim "JC" Crisham, who once counted the driver as friend.

Crisham was one of 95 Teamsters Local 120 members who lost their jobs — and two weeks of pay — when Lakeville Motor Express abruptly closed November 27, 2016 and the trucking company shifted management personnel, equipment and customers to a new non-union firm, Finish Line Express.

The workers, who say they are owed $524,000, charge Lakeville with siphoning assets to two other operations — LME and Finish Line — "with actual fraudulent intent" to avoid paying employees' wages.

Teamsters Local 120 planed the rally November 27, 2017 at FLE to mark the one-year anniversary of the abrupt shutdown of Lakeville Motor Express — which left workers owed two weeks' pay.

"We've had no justice," said Teamsters Local 120 president Tom Erickson. "We believe labor law needs to be changed... Not one dime has been paid out; we're still waiting for justice."

"Companies don't have a right to run away from a union contract," Erickson said.

Teamsters Local 120 has maintained pickets daily at FLE for the past year. Erickson pointed out a dirt path where picketers' footsteps had worn away the grass. "We are not going away until they're out of business or they recognize the contract and adhere to what they're supposed to adhere to."

"What these people did to us was completely wrong. They're crooks and thieves," said former LME employee Jim Sperling, Forest Lake, who worked 13-1/2 years at the company. He said the shift from LME to FLE "was all a scam, a scheme, a shell game."

"They put 95 people out on the street right before Thanksgiving and refused to pay us our last two weeks of wages," Sperling said. The workers also lost earned vacation time and employer pension contributions that were owed.

"Wage theft is an epidemic all over the country," Sperling noted. "If you work hard for your money, you should be paid."

Sperling went to the state capitol earlier this year to share his story and testify on behalf of proposed legislation to strengthen the state's ability to crack down on wage theft and increase enforcement and fines. The legislation stalled in committee.

"People need to stand up and fight for what's right... That's what drives me to come out here each day," said Sperling, who has been a presence on the Teamsters' FLE picket line nearly every day for the past year. "I'm retired now; I come up here pretty much every day to help on the picket line — because it has to be done."

With Local 120's giant semi-trailer as a backdrop, and a floodlight illuminating the night-time rally, Local 120 president Erickson introduced several speakers including Sperling; State Representative Erin Murphy, DFL-St. Paul; St. Paul Regional Labor Federation president Bobby Kasper and New Brighton City Council member-elect Graeme Allen.

"When I look at you, I see the front line in the fight for Minnesota's working families," said Murphy, who is a member and former staff rep of the Minnesota Nurses Association. "When you stand together, you make gains."

Kasper urged the crowd: "Never give up, never!"

"It's going to take time but we're going to win because we're right and the company is wrong," said Allen, who also is a Teamsters Local 120 member and an organizer for the Minneapolis Regional Labor Federation.

The microphone then passed from one former LME worker to another.

"I hope to hell, when all of this comes to an end, all of them who were involved in this... go straight to jail and spend a lot of time thinking about it," said Will Wintle, who had worked for 25 years for LME when the company shut down.

FLE trucks drove in and out of the gate while the rally progressed and workers could be viewed inside the facility moving freight around on forklifts.

Local 120 president Erickson wrapped up the rally: "For the FLE people who are listening — because I know you are — from Local 120, we are not going anywhere!"

After the rally, people lingered and continued talking. The event was a chance for former LME workers who had worked together for years to catch up with their former co-workers, who in the past year have found other jobs, retired, or moved out of state.

Several former LME workers shared their stories with a reporter.

Jim "JC" Crisham, a 42-year Teamsters member who had worked five years as a driver at LME, summed up the past year in one word: "Hell."

After LME's sudden closing, Crisham said, "at first, it was what are we going to do? What are we going to do?" Like many of his co-workers, he received help from Working Partnerships — the community services arm of the Minneapolis Regional Labor Federation. Working Partnerships administered an emergency...
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Crisham said he collected unemployment benefits for a few weeks and then found a new job — but at a non-union company — where he earns less, pays more for health insurance, and now works “12-hour days, no wife time, no time with the grandchildren.”

Alex Wintle, with father Will Wintle, was one of several father-son pairs who had worked at LME and lost their jobs at the same time.

Alex Wintle, who had worked six years at LME as a dockworker, said he and fiancé Rylee Stewart-Carlson learned about the LME shut-down on the way home from a hunting trip. Only two weeks earlier, the young couple had just closed on buying their first home.

“The trauma of it was the worst part — all of a sudden you don’t have a job,” said Stewart-Carlson. “We were young, 24 and 27,” she added. “We were excited to get a life going.”

“I was able to find work; it took me two to three months,” Alex Wintle said. He’s now working at a non-union company, he said, and “making a significant amount less.”

How much did the LME shutdown cost him in lost wages and earned vacation? “When I added it all up, it was roughly $2,000,” he said.

“All these guys are just great guys,” Stewart-Carlson said. “We’re close with a lot of people who worked at LME… Teamsters, they’re a family. It was tough to know that everyone was hurting.” She added, “I just hope that justice comes to those who deserve it.”

A Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry spokesperson said November 28: “The case is still open so there is no public information available. DLI is working to negotiate a possible settlement with the bankrupt Lakeville Motor Express that would include satisfying employees’ wage theft claims. We hope to know by the end of the year whether a good settlement for employees is possible or if litigation before an administrative law judge needs to move forward.”

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