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## Smithfield warns workers not to skip work on Martin Luther King Jr. Day

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DATELINE: TAR HEEL N.C.

Workers at a massive Smithfield Foods Inc. hog slaughterhouse will be docked a day's pay and could be disciplined if they skip work on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, company and union officials said Thursday.

A handful of the plant's 5,000 workers met with company officials Thursday and were asked to inform other employees that Monday would be treated as a normal work day, Smithfield spokesman Dennis Pittman said.

The meeting was called after hundreds of workers vowed to walk off the job or stay home in protest of the company's refusal to offer Monday as a paid holiday. The effort is being supported by the United Food and Commercial Workers union, which has tried unsuccessfully to organize the plant for more than a decade.

The plant, located about 80 miles south of Raleigh, is considered the largest hog processing plant in the world.

"The union set this up to make the company look bad," Pittman said. "As far as what will happen Monday, who knows? The union is doing their absolute best to make this a media event."

But union organizers said employees had a legitimate grievance, because Smithfield officials refused to accept a petition signed by 4,000 plant workers who supported the holiday designation.

"It's an insult, and it goes back to the core of the problem," said local organizer Eduardo Pena, who said company officials knew about the petition two weeks ago. "These workers feel like they don't have a way to express themselves in an organized way."

In November, the union backed about 1,000 plant employees who walked off the job to protest the firing of about 50 workers who the company said provided unverifiable identification information.

Workers were back on the job a day later after Smithfield agreed to give the employees 60 days to verify the information.