Miners must start at bottom

By MATT SCALLAN

AVENY ISLAND — Unionized miners at the International Salt Co. recently voted to let transplanted miners from the out-of-business Diamond Crystal Salt Co. at Jefferson Island start at the bottom of the company's pay scale, regardless of how much experience they have.

Hundreds of employees of the Diamond Crystal Salt Co. found themselves out of work two weeks ago when water rushed into the mine at Jefferson Island and left the mine unusable.

LESS THAN A WEEK after the Nov. 20 disaster, miners at International Salt Co. voted to let former Jefferson Island miners seeking jobs at the Avery Island mine start at the bottom of the pay scale.

Lonny Badeaux, president of Local 27 of the International Chemical Workers, refused to comment on the vote.

Lester 'Jay, manager of the mine, referred all questions about the matter to the union.

Don Thistlethwaite, personnel director at the Avery Island mine, said it is company policy for new employees to start at the bottom of the pay scale, but would not comment on the vote.

But some employees of the mine were more willing to speak up.

"It's not right that they should get in ahead of everybody else," one miner said. "It took me 10 years to get where I'm at."

Some sources say that electricians and mechanics will be allowed to start at comparable wages because of a shortage of those types of skilled workers.

MINERS SAID the vote to deny the Jefferson Island miners wages comparable to what they were making at Diamond Crystal was overwhelming.

"It's the first time that happened in a long time — that everybody agreed," one long-time employee said.

Still another miner defended the vote. "If they were in our place, they'd do the same thing," he said.