

ABC-TV workers in US locked out for two weeks

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More than 2,200 workers are in their second week of struggle after being locked out by ABC Inc., a major US broadcasting company owned by the Walt Disney company. The conflict began November 2 when the union, the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians (NABET), called a surprise 24-hour strike in a dispute over health care benefits. ABC management responded by locking out the workers, and stated that it would maintain the lockout until the union agreed to inform it of all future job actions, something that NABET refuses to do.

ABC's contract with NABET, which represents camera operators, videotape editors, couriers, technicians, engineers and some writers, expired March 31, 1997. The union walkout was designed to protest the refusal of ABC and Disney to provide adequate information about a health plan that the company is demanding all NABET employees accept.

A number of celebrities in the entertainment industry have shown support for the workers' struggle by refusing to cross the picket line. Actress Whoopie Goldberg, talk show host Jerry Springer and the singer Tony Bennett have cancelled scheduled appearances on ABC shows. The actor Danny Aiello, a former union official, has joined the picketing. A few politicians have canceled interviews, and some of the newscasters for ABC have been seen handing out coffee and donuts to the picketing workers. The union held a rally of over 400 people Thursday afternoon outside ABC headquarters in New York City.

One worker on the picket line, a video tape editor with about 20 years with ABC, told the WSWs that NABET offered the company essentially the same contract that expired more than two and half years ago. The company rejected the offer, demanding concessions. She estimated that the reduction of their

health benefits would amount to a few million dollars a year. As an example of the health care cutbacks under the new Walt Disney Signature plan, she stated that only those health care institutions that accepted limited payments, and therefore gave limited services, would be covered. This would mean that a worker who chooses to go to a highly rated hospital such as the Sloan-Kettering cancer center would no longer be compensated, as was previously the case.

All of the nonunion personnel working for ABC have already been compelled to accept the Walt Disney plan. NABET filed a complaint in July with the National Labor Relations Board. If the NLRB rules in NABET's favor, then according to union sources the company will have to pay back wages to all the workers who have been locked out. A ruling is expected soon, possibly this week.

A number of commentators, both at the rally and elsewhere, have explained that the chairman and chief executive officer of the Walt Disney Company, Michael D. Eisner, could easily pay to maintain his employees' health benefits out his own salary. According to a Securities and Exchange Commission filing, Mr. Eisner received \$10.65 million for fiscal year 1997, an increase from \$8.65 million the previous year. In addition, last year Eisner exercised his stock options of 7.3 million Disney shares worth an estimated \$565 million. According to a union placard the CEO makes \$98,700 per hour.

NABET, which is affiliated with the much larger union, the Communications Workers of America, has issued a leaflet to the public calling for a boycott of ABC-TV and Disney movies. Such consumer boycotts have been the stock in trade of trade union officials for years, and have been used to cover up their opposition to any serious struggle against the employers. In the

meantime, ABC settled a contract with 500 stagehands of Local 1 of the International Association of Theatrical Stage Employees and Moving Picture Operators, who are continuing to work throughout the lockout.

Even more fundamental than the health care issue is the demand--not only by ABC-TV, but increasingly by all media conglomerates--for the greater use of part-time and temporary staffing. The Disney Company acquired Capital Cities/ABC Inc. in 1996 for \$19 billion, creating the largest media and entertainment company in the world. Since the contract expired with NABET in 1997 Disney has been seeking to increase the percentage of temporary and part-time workers that it can hire.

According to one estimate ABC-TV's major competitors, NBC and CBS, have already increased their use of day laborers to 35 percent and 40 percent respectively, compared to 14 percent for ABC. According to a spokesperson at ABC the company 'has the most expensive, most restrictive contract in the industry.' The conflict has at its most fundamental source vast changes in technology, and changes in how the telecommunications industry does business. There has been a significant increase in the number of cable channels and new television networks, which are staffed with technicians, freelance writers and producers who lack job and income security.

One worker on the NABET picket line with three years at ABC stated that he and other union members feel that Disney would like to sell large sections of ABC, but keep the very profitable ESPN cable network that came with the 1996 purchase. It is a fact that in the second quarter of this year Disney earnings rose 21.5 percent based in part on advertising sales on its ESPN network, which offset weak ratings at ABC and poor returns on a number of their films.



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