ABC-TV workers locked out in US

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NABET members picketing in New York City

More than 2,200 workers are in their fourth day of a struggle after being locked out by ABC Inc., a major US broadcasting company owned by Walt Disney company. The conflict began on Monday when the union, the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians (NABET), called a surprise 24-hour national strike over health care benefits. ABC management responded by locking out the workers.

ABC stated it would maintain the lockout until the union agreed to inform it of all future job actions. In an offer to end the lockout, union leaders have agreed not to strike over the health issue, and not to strike for the next 30 days. Company spokesmen rejected this and demanded labor peace past the thirtieth day. The network stated that it is now utilizing replacement workers.

The union walkout was designed to protest the refusal of ABC and Disney to provide adequate information about a health plan to which the company is demanding all NABET employees subscribe. The union already filed a complaint in July with the National Labor Relations Board on this issue, saying the refusal to provide adequate information was an unfair labor practice. According to one NABET executive board member, nonunion staff have been compelled to accept the Walt Disney Signature health plan, which is clearly inferior to union members' current plan. He stated the new plan would cost workers more money for fewer benefits.

ABC's contract with NABET, which represents camera operators, videotape editors, couriers, technicians, engineers and some writers, expired March 31,1997. For more than two years, the union and management have not been able to reach a new agreement. According to union spokesmen, in addition to the health plan issue, other major disagreements include the replacement of full-time positions with temporary workers, weakening of seniority rights, elimination of the company's pension contribution, and round-the-clock scheduling.

ABC-Walt Disney is seeking major productivity concessions, as well as the reduction of its wage and benefits costs. 'All of our direct competitors have more flexibility,' claimed Ms. Hoover, a company spokesperson. Walt Disney's hard line becomes clearer in the aftermath of the entertainment giant's earnings report Tuesday. In the fourth quarter profits plunged 24 percent and earnings fell to $296 million or 14 cents a share, down from $390 million or 19 cents a share. Investors had expected profits of about 15 to 16 cents a share, but sluggish ratings led to the decline.