

ABC cuts benefits of locked-out workers

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Walt Disney Corporation, the parent company of ABC-TV, is halting health benefits to 2,400 workers locked out at the television network since November 3. A memo dated November 23 from Jeffrey Rosen, the vice president for Human Resources at ABC, states that coverage for healthcare, long-term disability, life insurance and dependent daycare will cease immediately. It further states that payment for substance abuse and dental plans will be terminated November 30.

The company decided to take this action shortly after the November 19 ruling by the New York regional director of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) that the lockout was legal. Encouraged by this decision, a spokesperson for ABC stated, 'When someone works for ABC, they get a salary and benefits. When someone is not working for ABC you lose this package.'

The dispute began when the union, the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians, called a surprise 24-hour strike November 2 to protest ABC's refusal to provide adequate information about a new health plan the company was imposing on workers. Walt Disney-ABC responded by locking out the strikers. Management said the lockout would continue unless the union agrees to give advance notice of any future job actions.

No new contract has been negotiated since the last one expired on March 31, 1997. Although the dispute over health benefits sparked the current struggle, the underlying issue is Walt Disney's desire to greatly increase the use of part-time and temporary workers. The two sides have not met since October 5. Only a number of days before the company unilaterally cut health benefits, management and the union agreed to resume negotiations under the auspices of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation service.

Brad Hughley, a 20-year technical engineer who was on the picket line in Manhattan, told the *World*

Socialist Web Site that the strikers are willing to work but are being prevented by Walt Disney. He said many workers had thought that the NLRB would rule in their favor, and were disappointed by the outcome. Dominic Dragonetti, a cameraman with 37 years at ABC, said, 'Walt Disney took away all of our benefits. This was made possible by the last contract when ABC was under the control of Capital Cities.'

'They claim that they don't have all the information about the health plan that they are offering to us. How can you purchase a plan and not know what is in it? I don't see how the NLRB ruled against us. They are obviously biased in the favor of management. In the new plan they are not telling us how much they will cover for any medical procedure. In the old plan they paid 80 percent. In the plan they are pushing it might be 1 percent.'

'Negotiations are resuming with the federal mediator. I have no confidence that this agency will help us get a fair settlement because the government works for the rich. Walt Disney spent billions buying ABC and ESPN. If they have all that money, why can't they give us a decent contract? I think that the answer lies in the fact that they want part-time workers.'

See Also:

ABC-TV workers in US locked out for two weeks
[17 November 1998]



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