# Striker killed on GE picket line in Kentucky

**Jerry Isaacs**
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A General Electric worker was struck by a police vehicle and killed Tuesday morning while picketing in front of a GE appliance manufacturing facility in Louisville, Kentucky. Michelle Rogers, a single mother with three teenage daughters, was in her early 40s and had worked for GE since 1994.

Rogers, who assembled dishwashers at the Louisville plant, was among the approximately 20,000 workers in 23 states who began a two-day strike Tuesday against GE's plans to more than double health care expenses for active and retired employees. The walkout is the first national strike against the giant company since 1969.

Witnesses said Rogers was among several strikers picketing at an entrance to Appliance Park at 5 a.m. when a police cruiser on the highway in front of the complex struck her. Rogers died at the scene.

Randy Payton, president of International Union of Electronic Workers/Communications Workers of America (IUE/CWA) Local 761, which represents 3,000 workers at the facility, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "This was a tragic accident. The lady was standing up for her rights on the picket line. We don't know how she ended up on the edge of the road, where she was hit." Payton said union attorneys were investigating the incident.

The police, who are withholding the name of the officer involved, claimed the policeman was not speeding and had probably not seen Rogers because of the early morning darkness. The officer, from a small municipal police department in nearby Hollow Creek, was not on duty at the plant, according to a police spokesman, but was driving to Louisville when the incident occurred.

Payton said Louisville metropolitan police had been visible at the picket lines since the walkout began, but had kept a low profile. GE spokesmen had pledged to continue operations during the 48-hour strike, saying the walkout, involving members of the IUE/CWA as well as the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), would have no impact on its first quarter profits. According to Payton, however, GE management had been unable to continue operations at the Louisville complex.

With $125 billion in revenues and $16 billion in 2002 profits, GE is among the largest corporation in the world. The company markets everything from aircraft engines, appliances and plastics, to gas turbines, medical imaging machines and financial services in more than 100 countries, and employs 300,000 people worldwide. It is a major defense contractor and stands to make billions from the Bush administration's military buildup.

On January 1 the company unilaterally raised out-of-pocket health care costs by an average of $400 per year for nearly 145,000 GE workers, along with retirees on fixed incomes. Union officials say GE, one of the most profitable companies in America, is pushing between $47 million and $53 million in costs onto workers and retirees. The day before the walkout the company reiterated that it would not back down on the health care issue.

The company has cited the growing trend of US firms to impose the burden of rising health care costs on their employees as justification for what it calls its "modest increase" in co-payments. Recent surveys show that 75 percent of employers are increasing employee contributions and cost-sharing provisions.

Local 761 President Payton said that the increase in health benefits was just the beginning, and that the company had already made it clear it intended to establish a 70-30 percent co-payment on workers once the contract for IUE/CWA and UE workers expired in June 2003. While the company seeks to extract further concessions from its workers, recently retired GE Chairman and CEO Jack Welch continues to receive a $10 million-a-year pension.

GE's hard line is backed by the Bush administration's agenda of tax cuts for the wealthy and intensified attacks on the living standards and democratic rights of the working class. A growing number of US corporations are moving to tear up union contracts, impose wage cuts and slash jobs. Last week a bankruptcy judge imposed a 14 percent wage cut on 35,000 mechanics at United Airlines, and on the same day that GE worker Michelle Rogers was

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killed on the picket line, the giant retailer Kmart announced it was shutting 300 more stores, wiping out the jobs of over 35, 000 workers.

Rogers' death was barely reported by the news media, which are well aware of the explosive class tensions simmering just below the surface of American society. The lack of coverage can also be explained by the fact that GE owns NBC, one of the four major television networks in the US, and has a large stake in MSNBC, CNBC and other cable stations.

The GE Appliance Park in Louisville is the company's largest unionized facility in the US, but over the past two decades, as the company was wiping out 150,000 jobs worldwide, it slashed the workforce in Louisville from 18,000 to 3,000. Half of the product lines were shipped out, mostly to low-wage countries, including Mexico. The Local 761 leadership responded to management's attacks by renegotiating the last local contract to include a wage freeze.

Overall, the percentage of unionized workers at GE's American operations has fallen from 39 percent to less than 25 percent since 1991. The current two-day strike involves about half of the company's 38,000 unionized workers.

The IUE/CWA and UE leaderships have proven themselves incapable of stopping the onslaught on jobs, working conditions and living standards, and have instead sought to collaborate with management to cut costs and increase productivity. In the last national contract the unions justified a reduction in pay raises on the grounds that wage concessions were necessary to preserve health benefits. IUE/CWA President Edward Fire is now saying that the union wants to cooperate with GE in lowering health care costs, but the company is refusing to meet with the union to discuss the issue.

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