

Illinois uranium workers locked out over health care dispute

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The lockout of more than 220 workers at a uranium enrichment plant in Metropolis, Illinois has entered its ninth week. Honeywell International Inc., the plant's owner, is seeking to offload health care costs onto workers, who are exposed on a daily basis to cancer causing radioactive substances.

The workers were locked out after contract negotiations over pensions and health care broke down June 28 between Honeywell and the United Steelworkers union, which represents the majority of the Uranium Hexafluoride Processing Facility workforce.

A public march on August 8 is reported to have involved hundreds demonstrating widespread support in Metropolis, a working class town of about 6,500 people.

The immediate dispute revolves around the attempt of Honeywell to raise the medical contributions of its union employees on par with that of the nonunion workforce at the plant. For its part, the company is offering an overall raise in pay as compensation, an offer rejected by the workers because of the inherent health risks associated with their work.

The plant, which is the only one of its kind in the nation, uses hydrofluoric acid to convert uranium yellowcake into uranium hexafluoride gas, also known as UF₆. The gas is liquefied, then solidified and sent off for further enrichment. It eventually makes its way to one of the more than 100 commercial reactors in the United States.

In addition to the risks involved in working with hydrofluoric acid, a highly corrosive substance, the hazards associated with the conversion process require workers to be tested for radiation levels twice a month as a result of their proximity to the uranium. Workers whose test results show unsafe radiation levels are

moved to a safer part of the plant or sent home until their tests normalize.

Underscoring the health risks of such work is a memorial near the plant for 42 workers who have died of cancer, and 27 others who have survived the disease. It is within this context that the workers refuse to have the burden of health care coverage loaded onto their backs.

The company has also sought to roll back retiree health care benefits and scrap pensions in the name of ensuring "the long-term economic viability of the facility, which has lost \$100 million over the past 10 years and is on a path to lose \$20 million this year."

However, the second-quarter earnings report for Honeywell—a Fortune 100 company with total assets of \$35 billion—belies its talk of "economic viability." The company showed a 4 percent increase in net income and posted a profit of \$468 million, up from \$450 million this time last year.

The facility has its own sordid history. Opened in the late 1950s it was originally associated with the development of nuclear material for the Cold War. As part of the Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program, it is one of many places throughout the country acknowledged to have exposed thousands of Americans over decades to dangerous materials and processes.

In 2003, Honeywell was sued by the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency when the plant leaked UF₆ gas into the air, causing parts of the town to be evacuated and the facility to be shut down for six months. As a result of being cited for two safety violations by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission over the incident, the plant was placed under additional oversight.

According to the *New York Times*, the plant is

currently being investigated by the EPA and the Justice Department regarding its storage of sludge. This has resulted in a grand jury being convened.

Since the lockout, the plant has been run by its 152 salaried employees and more than 200 scabs brought in from Louisiana. While Honeywell maintains that all the replacement workers have been trained in accordance with the company's license from the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), such a substitution of more than half the experienced workforce with contract workers unfamiliar with the facility is reckless at best.

Although the workforce is small, the plant produces on a mass scale. The facility is authorized by the NRC to possess 150 million pounds of natural uranium for UF6 production, and has an operating capacity of 12,700 metric tons of uranium per year.

The company announced earlier this month that it was pushing forward to full production operations with its scab workers. Metropolis's population, which broadly supports the locked-out workers, has expressed nervousness over their replacement by less experienced crews.

A St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* article published August 1 quoted town residents who were concerned about safety. "I feel my life's in danger here," one local restaurant owner told the paper. "They've got guys in there that've been in there no time at all." Billy McDaniel, the town's mayor, commented, "I never went to bed at night worried about the men being trained and capable of doing their jobs. I just never worried about it ... I want to be able to do that every night."

The *Post-Dispatch* reported that from the picket line outside the plant, workers could hear sirens and warning lights inside. According to the paper, workers "said they could sometimes gaze through the plant's windows to see red lights warning of a 'dust out,' requiring workers on that floor to wear respirators. The red lights were not an uncommon sight before the lockout, but the union claims it is happening more frequently now."



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