

Entergy locks out nuclear power plant workers in Massachusetts

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Entergy Corporation locked out workers at the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station in Plymouth, Massachusetts on Tuesday. The company escorted workers from the plant at midnight, and barred others from entering the plant for the morning shift.

More than 240 members of Utility Workers Union of America (UWUA) Local 369 are affected by the lockout. Several hundred unionized workers, including technical and engineering workers, remain on the job. Entergy is continuing operation of the nuclear facility utilizing contractors and management personnel at a reduced level of staffing, with some reportedly sleeping inside the plant.

Entergy implemented their lock-out “contingency plan” following a 174-32 vote by UWUA members to reject a four-year contract offer that included deep cuts to health care benefits and below-inflation wage increase. As one worker described the rejected contract, “By the fourth year we would actually be making less money than we are today. We were just going to get a 2 percent raise.”

The union agreed to two extensions to the contract when it expired May 15, and the UWUA negotiating team was reportedly at the bargaining table when Entergy marched workers out of the facility. Entergy claimed it was the workers who were putting the public at risk, issuing a written statement that union officials “stated flatly ... they reserved the right to walk off the job at any time, without any notice.”

Louisiana-based Entergy hauls in an estimated \$1 million a day, and will continue to reap these profits as the lockout continues. Following the cue of Cooper Tire and other companies, when workers refused to accept draconian demands Entergy seized the

opportunity to implement a lockout. The union says the company is illegally videotaping and audiotaping workers on the picket line in an effort at intimidation.

Despite unresolved environmental and safety issues, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) has just granted Entergy a 20-year renewal of its license to operate the nuclear site. NRC Chairman Greg Jaczko was the sole vote opposing renewal of the license.

The Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station is the same model as the Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan that suffered a catastrophic accident following an earthquake and tsunami in March 2011. The Massachusetts facility operates in a densely populated area about 40 miles southeast of Boston.

“They make a million dollars a day when the thing is running, and we’re the ones that are keeping it up,” a locked-out worker with 10 years seniority told the WSWs. “We’re not looking to become rich, we just want to be treated fairly. They’re trying to force a much more expensive health care system down our throats. All they want to do is take, take, take.”

Entergy wants to raise workers’ contribution to health care costs from the present 25 percent to 37 percent. “For a family person it would cost more than a thousand dollars a month out of pocket,” the same worker explained. “They’re trying to price us out of it. You won’t be able to afford it, so you’ll have to take a substandard plan.”

“And we have no say-so in the matter,” he added. “Basically, it’s like being a kid living at home. ‘We’ll tell you what’s going on.’ That’s not bargaining in good faith. They say it’s a fair and equitable offer? I’d be embarrassed to lie that much to someone.”

Workers on the picket line explained how Entergy’s actions posed a serious safety threat. “We practice four training emergency drills every year, and we go

through extensive training for it—how to respond, where to respond to,” one worker said.

“The training of the people that are replacing us—well you can’t cover it all in so little time. They brought in contractors and the people that are running the reactor now are all management people from Pilgrim, who aren’t familiar with running the reactor. The ones who are, they’re all out here.”

“It’s ludicrous to think that they can replace us with a scab that has two weeks’ training,” another picket added.

The WSWs reporting team distributed copies of the statement “Lessons of the Cooper Tire struggle” on the Plymouth picket line. One worker who had come down to support the Pilgrim workers was familiar with that lockout. “That was bad,” he said. “I know they’ve closed a lot of plants in the Midwest, steel mills, and other places.”

He explained that there was a lot of support in the area for the locked-out workers at Pilgrim, despite the minimal coverage in the media. “What we need is a lot of publicity, but we’re not getting any. Channel 4 had them on there walking the picket one time, and that was it.”

UWUA Local 369 has filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board against Entergy in the wake of the lockout. In addition to charges that Entergy-employed security forces are video and audiotaping picketing workers in violation of a state “two-party content” law, they also say management personnel made a series of “coercive, threatening statements” to workers prior to last week’s contract vote.

Two Democratic Massachusetts congressmen, Reps. Edward Markey and William Keating, have sent a letter to the NRC questioning the decision to renew Entergy’s license in view of the lockout. They write that they are “concerned individuals whose daily jobs may not involve actual operation of a nuclear power plant would be severely challenged in the event of an emergency at the facility.”

The Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station was built in 1972 by Boston Edison and was sold in 1999 to Entergy Corporation, becoming the first nuclear power plant in the US to be sold through a competitive bid process. The sale was the direct result of the deregulation of the electrical utility industry, an effort championed by the Democratic Party.

Spent nuclear fuel from the Pilgrim facility is being kept in an on-site storage pool, waiting for federal direction on how to dispose of it. The Yucca Mountain site in Nevada had been considered for this purpose until it was deselected in 2009. The local group Pilgrim Watch has filed numerous legal and procedural challenges to the plant’s operation.



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