

Massachusetts: Locked-out nuclear power plant workers reject contract

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22 June 2012

Workers locked out by Entergy Corporation at the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station in Plymouth, Massachusetts voted down a contract proposal Wednesday, delivering a rebuke to their union leadership. The tentative pact, which had been unanimously recommended by the bargaining committee of Utility Workers Union of America (UWUA) Local 369, was rejected in 137-89 vote.

More than 240 UWUA members have been locked out by Louisiana-based Entergy for two and a half weeks. The workers are highly skilled with many years experience operating the 40-year-old nuclear power plant 40 miles southeast of Boston. Workers had previously voted 174 to 32 to reject a contract that included a below-inflation wage offer over four years as well as increased cost-sharing for health insurance.

At midnight June 5, management escorted workers out of the plant and barred others from entering for the morning shift the following day. Entergy implemented a “contingency plan” with replacement workers, including management personnel and contractors with minimal experience, claiming that the union members had put the public at risk because the workers “reserved the right to walk off the job at any time, without any notice.”

Although neither Entergy nor the union has released details of the newly rejected agreement, workers indicated the pact represented little improvement on Entergy’s previous offer. As one worker described it, Entergy is “like a cobra” that continues to strike at workers’ wages and benefits.

In a press release Wednesday, Pilgrim plant spokesperson Carol Wightman reiterated the intransigent position of management, stating: “We continue to believe the contract rejected today by the Local 369 Union membership represents an exceptional

wage and benefits package and reflects the realities of today’s economy in an increasingly competitive electric power business.” In “today’s economy,” the utility giant is hauling in an estimated \$1 million a day in profits during the lockout.

UWUA Local 369 President Dan Hurley, who claimed before Wednesday’s vote that the tentative pact contained “important protections” for workers, said following the solid rejection of the agreement Wednesday: “The hardworking men and women who keep Pilgrim Nuclear Power Plant operating profitably and safely have spoken loud and clear: They will not accept cuts to their pay or health care from a company making record profits and paying executives in the tens of millions.”

Boston union officials, however, have made no effort to mobilize support for the locked-out workers, despite widespread public backing for the workers’ demands for a decent contract and concerns for safety. The Local 369 union leadership agreed to two extensions to the contract when it expired May 15 and the union bargaining team was reportedly sitting at the negotiating table when Entergy personnel marched workers out of the plant June 5.

A rally scheduled this past Tuesday by the Greater Boston Labor Council in support of the locked-out workers was abruptly canceled after Local 369 negotiators reached a tentative agreement with Entergy at 4 a.m. that morning. The only action Local 369 leaders have initiated is a toothless complaint filed with the National Labor Relations Board, claiming Entergy management personnel made a series of “coercive, threatening statements” to workers prior to the first contract vote.

Even within its own ranks, UWUA Local 369 has refused to mobilize action in solidarity with the locked-

out nuclear power plant workers. The local represents more than 3,000 utility workers in Massachusetts, including about 1,850 workers at NSTAR, a company delivering electricity and natural gas to 1.4 million customers in the eastern and central parts of the state.

Last month, NSTAR workers voted 98 percent in favor of strike action if the union did not reach a new contract agreement. Union negotiators reached an agreement on June 1, the day the previous contract expired. On June 11, less than a week into the Entergy lockout, Local 369 leaders averted a strike, pushing through a vote for a contract at NSTAR that management boasted is “consistent with industry changes.” The pact provides annual wages increases of only 3 percent, 2.75 percent and 2.5 percent over three years, respectively, and eliminates defined retirement benefits for new hires.

On its web site, Local 369 describes the contract at NSTAR as “an agreement that provides security for our members, wage increases each year, great benefits and working conditions.” The union touted as a great victory the fact that NSTAR was prevented from moving 250 call center jobs from Westwood, Mass. to a neighboring state. “We wanted to protect those jobs,” Local 369 President Hurley commented at the time. “They are good Massachusetts jobs. We were afraid they were going to shift them to Connecticut.”

In the face of efforts by the union leadership to isolate the locked-out workers and impose a concessions contract, workers have taken an important stand against Entergy’s aggressive and arrogant posture with Wednesday’s rejection vote. Any advance of this fight, however, will require taking the contract negotiations out of the hands of the union leadership and mobilizing the strength of other workers—including the thousands who work for the utility companies—behind the locked-out workers.

As of Thursday, Entergy had not returned to the bargaining table, despite the urging of the union. Several hundred technical, engineering and other unionized workers—all with no-strike clauses in their contracts—continue to operate the plant, along with the management and contracted replacement workers. A Pilgrim plant management press release stated: “It is unclear at this time, what the next steps will be, but we believe that the federal mediation process is the success path to a contract that will enable our employees to

come back to work.”

Only days before locking out UWUA Local 369, Entergy was granted a 20-year license extension by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to operate the Pilgrim plant, despite unresolved environmental and safety issues. The power station—which operates in a densely populated area—is the same model as the Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan that suffered a catastrophic accident in March 2011 following an earthquake and tsunami.

Massachusetts is appealing the NRC’s decision to relicense the Entergy power station, calling on the NRC to vacate the renewal and require the commission to prepare an environmental impact statement. In a statement earlier this week, state Attorney General Martha Coakley said, “The NRC, over our objections, chose to relicense Pilgrim without fully considering the important safety issues raised in the aftermath of the Fukushima accident.”

In an emailed statement, Entergy spokesman Michael Burns claimed that the NRC had conducted “extremely thorough” safety and environmental reviews in advance of the license renewal. In the course of the lockout so far, Entergy has postponed a quarterly safety drill “so we could focus all our resources on the safe operation of the Pilgrim station,” according to a company spokesperson.



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