

Con Ed lockout puts New York in danger of power outages during heat wave

A WSWWS reporting team
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On the third day of its lockout against 8,500 utility workers, the energy corporation, Con Edison, which provides electricity to 3.2 million households in New York City and Westchester County to the north, is increasingly running the risk of power outages, delays in service and even deaths in the worst heat wave of the year. Temperatures dipped into the 80s Fahrenheit on Tuesday but are expected to rise back into the 90s for the rest of the week.

On Monday, a spokesman for Con Ed told *Crain's New York Business*: "In order to protect customers we need a guarantee that there won't be a sudden work stoppage. We need to run the system safely and reliably and a sudden work stoppage would put that in jeopardy."

The reality, however, is that the company's attempt to maintain operations with 5,000 management employees is posing a severe threat to both the ability of the system to function and the managers being plugged into the locked out workers' jobs.

One management replacement worker received burns on Monday at a job site in Brooklyn, and the Westchester Campus of Fordham University in West Harrison was without power for 24 hours after a construction crew damaged electrical cables. Classes were canceled Monday afternoon, when the campus lost power, and Tuesday. School will resume Thursday morning.

Local 1-2 has agreed to resume negotiations with the company on Thursday, after the July 4th holiday, after local Democratic Party politicians urged both sides to come together. In a letter to the company and the union, City Council and mayoral hopeful Speaker Christine Quinn on Monday said that the union should agree to give notice of intention to strike. The company decided to lock out its workers when the union refused to do so

early Sunday morning.

Con Edison, which saw profits of a billion dollars last year, is asking for significant givebacks in the workers' health plan and the ripping up of their pension plan, replacing it with a 401(k) dependent on the vacillations of the stock market. Government mediators will be present at the negotiations, as the union has requested.

The union has called for a rally at the company's headquarters on Thursday morning.

The World Socialist Web Site spoke with locked out workers on Tuesday in front of the corporate headquarters on Irving Place in lower Manhattan.

Elias Claudio, a worker with 25 years of experience at Con Ed, said about the lockout, "They want to take our pensions, benefits, and have us not get raises. [Con Ed CEO] Kevin Burke is getting millions of dollars already and he does not care about our pensions. [Con Ed President Craig] Ivey is behind it; they brought him in from the South, and he is known for busting unions.

"If we win this it will help every worker and every union. If we win, Verizon workers will get a contract. The managers will even benefit because they lost their pensions, too, and they might be able to get them back.

"If we lose it will affect workers all over America. Even the cops are encouraging us because they know if we lose, their benefits will be under attack."

When asked his thoughts on the role being played by the union and the Democratic politicians, Claudio added: "1983, before I worked here, was the last time we went on strike. We wanted improvements, but after two and a half months we settled for less. Four years ago we were supposed to have a strike, but Governor Paterson said we shouldn't, so we didn't. Almost everyone says this is a company union. Two years ago Con Ed changed our benefit providers in the middle of a contract and the union did nothing.

"I don't believe in politicians. I don't even vote; they just promise you one thing then give you another.

"I can't wait to get my pension and get out of New York, but the truth is this is going on in every state and every country."

Will Dixon, who immigrated to New York from Barbados, has worked for Con Ed for 12 years. "This [the lockout] is something they have been planning for some time," he said. "They came into the negotiations with the mindset of not meeting us halfway.

"One issue is the pension. The company wants to just take the pension fund from us. With the way things are going you need that to maintain yourself and your family after you retire, especially with the cost of living going up.

"I don't think the managers can run the system. This is a very dangerous job and a lot of these people have not worked for a long time."

Dixon added: "If you look at the corporate world when they make a billion dollars one year they want \$2 billion next year. They do this at the expense of the workers. This is about greed especially with the bailout of the banks. The CEOs make millions of dollars in bonuses. How can they live with this when people don't have pensions?"

Jules Demasi spoke with the WWSWS along with co-worker, who asked that he be referred to in the interview as "20019", his company ID number because, "That's how they look at us, as numbers, not as people with names. When they locked us out, they took our ID cards, keys, tools so we don't have access. We can't even get company emails or check on our paychecks."

Both Jules and "20019" are field operators doing emergency work with six years experience. Asked for their thoughts about the lockout, "20019" said, "The fact that they are going to give us unemployment scares me. They want to take everything we have. I am not willing to go back without a contract."

Jules added, "It looks like it will be a long thing." Noting that a couple of Verizon workers had joined the picketers, Jules continued, "Verizon went back, and over a year later they still have no contract. They [the union and Con Ed] have to meet somewhere in the middle. If they want us to pay 40 percent toward medical, I would pay 20 percent. "20019" agreed, "I would pay 20 percent to keep the pension. That is the

elephant in the room. We get a low rate of pay for the pension. Kevin Burke, the CEO, has \$18 million in his retirement already."

Asked about the problems facing the locked-out workers, "20019" said, "We had 800 people here. There are 8500 in the union, although they are scattered in the boroughs, but the majority should be here. Only a third of the union votes. It is a big shame we don't have more unity."

When asked about the role of the union, Jules explained that he had been in other jobs where the unions had not led a real fight. "I worked at the Javits Center for three years in the Teamsters. We waited three years for a contract. This was around 2007-8, and we wound up getting a \$1.62 raise. It was ridiculous. The union agreed to only \$500 back pay, not even as pay, but putting it into our retirement fund. I was owed a lot more than \$500 after three years. I worked for a string company once. They said, 'This is contract. Take it or we will move the operations to other factories, like in Japan.' I am not working to live like a millionaire. I just want to pay for my health care and my kids' education. I am going to miss out on a week's pay until at least Thursday when they start negotiations again."

When asked about the role of the government, Jules said, "When Bush was in office, he and the vice-president made a lot of money. Obama is a multi-millionaire, too. I have not thought about socialism. I would agree with taxing the rich sharply. What do they do? Sit at their desks all day."



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