Thousands of locked out Con Edison workers rally as New York City faces brownouts

A WSWS reporting team
6 July 2012

On Wednesday morning thousands of locked out Con Edison workers, their families and supporters rallied in front of the utility company's corporate headquarters near Union Square in lower Manhattan.

Most had only found out the day before that their health benefits had been cut off by Con Ed, and the rally took on a combative atmosphere with chants and cheers going up spontaneously from the crowds of utility workers, particularly as firefighters, delivery truck drivers and motorists blared their horns in support.

Many carried homemade signs denouncing the CEO of Con Edison, multimillionaire Kevin Burke, who earns an estimated $5,000 an hour and has $18 million in his own pension fund. On Wednesday, Con Ed took out full-page ads in the city's tabloids justifying the lockout.

Con Edison locked out 8.500 workers on Sunday morning when the union that is bargaining for them, the Utility Workers Union of America (UWUA) Local 1-2, balked at agreeing to a seven-day strike notification. The company is seeking to replace the current pension system with a 401(k) for workers and to significantly reduce health benefits. The company's wage proposal would give a minuscule raise over the next three years.

Con Edison supplies electricity to 3.2 million households in the city – the largest population area in the United States. It is attempting to do so during the lockout with 5,000 replacement workers, mostly inexperienced managers. On Wednesday the utility announced that it was reducing voltage by 5 percent to a number of working-class neighborhoods in Brooklyn.

A heat wave with temperatures well into in the 90s Fahrenheit (32 Celsius) has gripped the city for over a week. The company says that it must repair overloaded and straining infrastructure. This so-called brownout means that certain types of energy-hungry equipment cannot be operated, such as some types of motors, incandescent lights, and water heaters. The lockout of skilled workers during what may well become an energy emergency is being done in complete disregard for the health and safety of New Yorkers.

Certainly it is endangering the safety of the managers whom it has required to scab against the workers. A second manager received burns to the face in a manhole explosion on Manhattan's Upper West Side on Wednesday afternoon.

The union and company began negotiations again at noon on Thursday, preceded by an informal meeting between the Con Ed representatives and the president of the national UWUA , Mike Langford.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to many workers at the Thursday morning rally. Workers were eager to talk and were equally interested in reading the WSWS's previous coverage, and a number told the reporters that they had looked at the web site.

Workers in general felt that they could draw the line against corporate attacks on living standards here and now with militant action, and that a militant push could begin to turn the tables for other groups of workers who have received significant setbacks recently. Verizon workers were sometimes mentioned in this context. Workers at the telecommunications giant struck for two weeks last summer, but were forced to return to work by their union, the Communications Workers of America, and still do not have a contract.

Patrick told the WSWS, "Now they have cut off our medical benefits. They want to eliminate our traditional pensions. There is $7 billion in the pension fund, and Con Ed wants to get its hands on it.

"Right now we can retire at age 55 when we reach 30 years' service. They pay us our pension every month when we retire. Now they want to make it so you can't retire until you are 60. They just want us to pay into a 401(k), and see what happens with the stock market. They don't care about us.

"CEO Kevin Burke already has an $18 million pension. He makes $11 million a year, and he is trying to take our pensions.

"The wage deal is BS, too. One and a quarter percent over four years is 20 cents a year.

"They are also raising the family medical premiums up to $133 a month. I think I am paying $55 a month now. We are the middle class. We feed the rich and take care of the poor, and they aren't happy with that.

"The politicians, Democratic and Republican, should open

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their mouths and say something about this. They don't because it is all about money.

"I don't want to go back to work without a contract. They locked us out. If we go back now, they have got us. Right now we have got them.

"I think if we get what we want here, the workers without a contract at Verizon and transit will get what they want. I don't think we are going to lose. My children don't have medical, and I don't know how I am going to pay my rent. But I am going to stay the course."

Carlos Gordon has worked for Con Ed for 22 years as a welder and boiler mechanic in the power house. As an asbestos and lead worker he is exposed to all the dangers involved with those materials.

He told the WSWS: "We were locked out because the president refused to accept the contract Con Ed offered. It is an across-the-board thing. Industry is blaming the workers and the unions. All the big banks are now being investigated. It all boils down to the mismanagement in the economy. They feel they can cut the union benefits."

When we asked Carlos about the political issues in the corporate attacks, he replied, "Back in American history when Andrew Jackson was president, he closed down the banks. In some cases the banks have too much power to manipulate the markets. Having a workers' party would be difficult. The 1 percent would do whatever they can to stop it. They have the law on their side. Look at the Constitution. There are rights for business. America fought the British, got rid of them over a tea tax. Now it is like the same things."

Joseph Handel has been a B mechanic at Con Ed for four years, working on transformers underground with 27,000 volts of electricity coming in. As with most of the workers interviewed by the WSWS, wages were not the main issue for him. "I am most concerned by pensions and sick pay."Joseph said. "People have to stick to their guns, although in New York, especially, they want to bring wages down."

Rob Lacasse described the Con Ed struggle in the following terms: "I have been here eight years and have never seen it so bad. I have never seen the company attack the supervising management first. But their contract doesn't come into effect until 2013. So they are turning around and telling us, 'See what supervisors are getting, so should the workers.'

"They took away pensions and switched them to cash-balance (like 401K's) for the new hires, and raised the retirement age for people already in the company. The company wants the billions built up in the pension fund. They have a surplus that can only be used for the pension. But it is our money."

Rubin Rivera, a worker with six years of experience said, "The main issue is greed. It is the same in the rest of the country. I don't understand how a company can make a billion dollars in profits and cannot give us benefits. Already, most of us are not getting top pay, and they have cut our overtime. This is a dangerous job. We are going into holes that are 100 degrees wearing a shirt and jeans."

We asked Rubin what he thought about the Democratic mayoral hopefuls suggesting that the union promise not to strike without notice. Rivera responded, "If we do that, we can't fight. It would be like telling a boxer going into a ring 'You can't swing too hard.'

"You never know if a politician has a share in the company. Everyone has their fingers in something. [Governor] Cuomo doesn't like the unions. I don't know why they endorse him. I don't believe politicians are there for the people." He added, "This is the first time I think the union is doing the right thing. I believe we are going to stand strong."

Another worker told the WSWS, "I don't see how this is legal. They promised me a pension with benefits and now they are taking that away. I might not have worked here if I knew there wasn't going to be a pension.

"They want us to pay more into our medical, and take a pay freeze. What does this job offer? It is dangerous. I am 30 years old. I might not have Social Security, and, now, no pension."

Sebastian Rodriguez, with four and half years of experience said, "I am under five years, so whatever is in this contract is what I'm getting. I will stay out all year if I have to. I would even go back for the same contract we have now, and that's not so great

"You want a company that cares about the customers and its employees, but they only care about their bottom line."

Asked about the Democratic politicians requesting a strike notice he responded, "If we agreed to strike after two weeks, the heat wave would be over. The weather is our best weapon."

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