

Con Edison continues lockout of New York utility workers

A WSWS reporting team
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Utility giant Con Edison, which supplies electricity to 3.2 million customers in New York City and Westchester County to its north, is continuing its lockout of 8,500 workers as a heat wave continues to grip the region. The struggle has now entered its second week.

A Con Ed transformer exploded on Saturday underneath E. 56th Street in busy midtown Manhattan, setting off an explosion in a parked vehicle and sending flames up the scaffolding around a 16-story building. A Con Ed spokesman speculated that high temperatures were the cause of the accident.

Although no one was hurt in the explosion, this was only the most recent in a series of accidents and injuries related to the lockout. Con Ed is attempting to maintain its overtaxed infrastructure with a force of 5,000 managers who have been brought in to replace the locked-out workers. Two of these managers have already been hurt in accidents.

Con Ed has announced it will increase voltage to neighborhoods, primarily in Brooklyn and the Bronx, where it had reduced the energy supply in what are known as brownouts. This is in anticipation of cooler temperatures in the next few days. Meanwhile, Con Ed has removed locations of outages on its website and is providing little or no public information on the status of its systems.

In the face of this growing crisis, Con Ed and the media have now begun a campaign blaming workers of “sabotage.” The company claimed gunshots had been fired at its equipment in Armonk in Westchester County on Wednesday and Thursday. The company said it was removing the outage information out of concern for the safety of its strikebreakers.

Attempting to paint the workers as saboteurs is an obscenity. The corporation is holding the health and safety of the population of the largest city in the US hostage during a period of high energy consumption.

Con Ed, which made a billion dollars in profits last year, is demanding substantial concessions in health care and pensions from the union that negotiates for the workers, the Utility Workers Union of America (UWUA) Local 1-2. The company locked the workers out July 1 when the union did not agree to give advanced notice of possible strike action.

The *World Socialist Web Site* visited the picket lines at Con Edison’s headquarters near Union Square in lower Manhattan and spoke to workers about the lockout.

Jose Torres, who has five years service at Con Ed, said, “The issues in the lockout are wages, pensions and health care. They are trying to break our wages down to nothing. They want to give us a 1.5 percent wage increase over a four-year contract. I am against all of this.”

Another worker, Mayo, said, “The main sticking points of the negotiations are benefits and pensions. To me one percent over four years is not enough because upper management is getting a lot more. And inflation could be two percent, three percent or four percent. With that you can’t buy groceries to feed your family.

“Then they want to take over your pension. If you lose your defined benefit pension, you never know how much it is worth. It is like a 401(k). If the market drops, you lose. Any loss to our pensions is a travesty.”

John, who is a customer service representative, said, “I’m not very happy about this. I was here Saturday night when the contract expired. I thought it was going to be OK until 2 AM. There were about 150 of us here at about 10 PM. Union reps let us know what was

happening. At midnight they kept talking, and it still sounded good. Then Con Ed locked us out.

“The work here is not like Verizon where they can turn people off with a switch. We have to go to every location to turn a customer’s power back on and repair the wires. I don’t think management can handle a big power surge or a blackout. They don’t have enough people to handle this. I would say only 2,500 of their 5,000 could do field work.

“Con Ed has already threatened lives and caused widespread suffering by calling the lockout on Saturday. We always send teams to help out with power outages and disasters around the country. With last week’s storm along the East Coast, power was out in New Jersey and on Long Island and many other places for long periods of time. Con Ed locked us out so we couldn’t send out teams as we regularly do, and the people along the East Coast were forced to suffer with power outages and breakdowns longer than they should have because of Con Ed’s action.

“That is the game management wants to play. It was a long, hot summer when we went on strike for nine weeks in 1983. It is going to be a summer of brownouts and blackouts.

“They should leave the pensions alone. We do a dangerous job. You have to go down in manholes where there are live wires. The firefighters and police don’t go down there. Sometimes there are explosions and fires. People call the fire department when this happens, but they don’t go down in the manholes. If it is 100 degrees up on the street, it is 130 down in the manholes. There is the same kind of danger dealing with transformers and wires up on the poles. We come out to fix them, not the Fire Department or police. They should leave our pension like it is.”

Dwight Powell works in the facilities management department of the Third Avenue yard in Brooklyn, and has 31 years of service. “We maintain the physical plant,” he told the WSWS, “by running the computer wires, building offices, painting and repairing the plant.

“The five percent reduction in voltage for a number of neighborhoods in Brooklyn is not an unusual occurrence,” he said. “This is a multibillion-dollar corporation that should be able to provide full service when people need air conditioning in the summer heat

waves.

“The Public Service Commission of New York oversees us. The PSC is as much of a con artist as Con Ed. They are not interested in the public.

“They have stopped our health benefits. I have heart trouble, and I was supposed to go for a stress test. Oh my god. I am disappointed that none of the politicians have come out to condemn this. I know a family whose daughter needs constant medical care. She needs a number of medications and care. This might stop because Con Ed stopped our health care, and the father is the only one in the family working.

“I agree in principle with the working class building its own party. If we had our own voice, our own party, this kind of thing at Con Ed would not happen. We wouldn’t be thrown out on the street with no benefits, no salary and our pension system under attack.

“This all started with PATCO. It began with Reagan firing the Air Traffic Controllers. I think they were gutsy and brave to stand up to him. They should have had more backing from the unions. The union leaders were too afraid to do this, I think. I would have gladly gone out to support the PATCO strike.

“Now things have come full circle, and they want everything. We are aware that all the other unions are watching this. We know this is critical. Everyone is looking at us, and we can’t let them take this back. I look at this personally as a civil rights struggle. Enough is enough, and I’m not going to take it anymore. In an ideal world, all the other unions would come out with us, especially Verizon and transit. We are making a stand, and I am asking all other unions to come out and support us. I don’t think the union leadership will issue a call for others to come out because they are too close to the company. But we shall overcome. We have to. It is do or die.”



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