

Con Ed workers disgusted as union reports contract ratification

A reporting team
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Utility Workers Union of America Local 1-2, representing 8,500 workers at the New York utility who were locked out for four weeks in July, announced on August 15 that the proposed contract had been ratified by a 93 percent margin.

The lopsided vote reflects the fact that workers felt there was little alternative to the concessions demanded by the company, given their union's support for the takeaways and refusal to mount any struggle. Some workers reported that 40 percent of those eligible did not cast ballots at all. Judging from the reaction from meter readers and clerical workers who spoke to reporters from the WSWs at Con Ed's headquarters in Manhattan, most of those who did vote were equally disgusted.

The final contract, whose terms were not announced until a few days after Con Ed workers returned after the lockout ended last month, includes major concessions on pensions, health care and other provisions. (See "Vote No on the Con Ed-UWUA contract!") The deal was brokered by New York's Governor Andrew Cuomo, to whom the UWUA union officials had appealed for "assistance."

As elsewhere, the alliance between the union and the Democratic Party politician proved a major mechanism for strangling the workers' struggle and subordinating their interests to the demands of the employer. Cuomo engineered a return to work on Con Edison's terms on the pretext of a storm emergency requiring that the company end its lockout.

Significantly, the Con Ed lockout ended just days before the deadline expired for the negotiation on a new contract for Verizon workers, who have been working without an agreement since last year's strike. Another consideration for the unions is the upcoming Democratic convention that will renominate Barack Obama, and the effort to drag workers to the polls in favor of the Democrats in the fall elections.

The Socialist Equality Party won wider readership among Con Ed workers during the lockout, and interest and growing sympathy for its program of uniting the working class in opposition to the unions' alliance with the Democrats and for support for a socialist program, including public ownership of giant utilities like Con Ed under workers' control.

Many Con Ed workers stopped to talk and discuss the issues outside the company's main headquarters in Manhattan last Thursday.

Marlin Salcedo, a Con Ed meter reader, said he had voted against the contract.

"I am not sure why the contract passed," he said, adding that he did not know anyone who had actually read the agreement. He explained that he voted no because the pension is only guaranteed for 25 years, and he is afraid that he will not be able to get a guaranteed pension like the more senior workers.

"I am 27 years old and will not be able to retire in my 50s," Marlin said. In other words, he will not be able to retire after working 25 years and so will be stuck with the inferior retirement package that the union and the company negotiated.

Mesfin Savage expressed disagreement with the fact that all the workers who have less than five years will not get the same pension as the rest of the workforce.

"I do not agree with that," he told us. "It is not fair. I find it hard to believe that 93 percent voted for it. It sounds kind of fishy."

Mesfin explained that to understand how the union could have obtained such results, it was necessary to examine the experience that workers have had with the union in past struggles.

"A majority voted yes because they felt that they had no choice," he said. "In the past when workers voted down a contract, the union would later negotiate something inferior and the workers ended up with an even worse contract. Also, during the lockout, there was no health care for the workers."

Brandon Baxter, with six years at Con Ed, said about the contract, "It is not the greatest, but at least it's something. We are taking cuts because the money is being stolen by Goldman Sachs and guys like Jamie Dimon. They are our real bosses."

James, a worker at Con Ed for over 30 years, spoke about the union: "It is interesting when you see that only 60 percent voted on the contract; that shows the state of the union. It also helps the union administration that wants to see people apathetic. If people were mobilized the union heads wouldn't be able to make up contracts like this.

"They don't want the rank and file to be informed. We were out here protesting but the union wasn't telling us what the issues were. It was just hearsay that we were getting."

Nelson, a worker at Con Ed since 1973, said, "This is a contract that is really going to hurt people. Things are already

pretty bad. We were at 9/11 because we had to repair lines, now we have half as many people as we had back then.”

Asked about the unions’ support for the Democrats, he said, “Romney is terrible, but the Democrats are the same. You want to fight but it is like your hands are tied by the union. They are supposed to represent you, but it doesn’t feel that way.

“My grandson asked me, ‘How can they cut wages so much? How will people buy what they are making?’ I can’t answer that.” Nelson told the WSWS reporter: “Desperation is going to have people coming to you guys. The system is going to collapse and is already falling apart.”

Evelyn Lee, who has six years service, said: “I don’t believe 93 percent of the workers voted for the contract. I was happy to keep my pension, and I am sorry the workers with five years or less are going to end up with a cash-out pension. Why should people have to work 50 years, and not be sure what their pension is? I don’t think anyone should not have a pension. What the cash out means is that you don’t know what you will get to retire on after 25 or 30 years.

“The medical costs are going up so much it is ridiculous. They are basically saying we have to stay healthy. I have heard a lot of people say that the premium we have to pay for our family plan is going up a lot. Then there is so much co-payment that you don’t want to go to the doctor. These are desperate times for everyone. If the union was going to send us back to work with no contract, what was the point of us being out?”

Rob said, “I think all of the workers were put in a position where we wanted to fight. But we are in the middle between the union and management. Both are doing things we don’t know about.

“What they said is they won’t mess with our pensions for 25 years. What happens to people after 25 years? What happens to people with less than five years seniority now? They have put off the inevitable where pensions are concerned. But all politicians, both the Democrats and Republicans, will put Social Security and pensions on the chopping block to be cut.”

Donna Berisha explained, “I didn’t vote on the contract because I didn’t get a ballot sent to me. The health care increases are from \$68 for the family plan now to \$94 a week at the end of the contract. This is almost \$400 a month we will have to pay, and it is a 38 percent increase in our health care costs. The deductibles depend on the plan. There are three plans, but the one with the lowest deductibles is the one that will cost \$94 a week.

“I kind of saw the pension attacks coming. They are pushing people to the 401(k) plans whether Social Security will be around or not. I don’t think it is fair, but how many unions have managed pensions now? How much success is one union going to have if 98 percent of the unions have given up defined benefit pensions? This suggests to me that the unions are failing.

“Workers shouldn’t be asked to give up their wages and pensions. There is a big squeeze going on now where they are

taking away the living standards of the working people. Where are the national leaders of the unions? What are they doing while this is going on?

“What my father told me is that you keep working for them, and they keep taking from you. And both of the political parties are part of this.”

Ebony Richmond has been a meter reader with Con Edison for only one and a half years and is therefore one of the workers who will not be covered for a pension when the 25-year guarantee of the contract (a questionable promise at best) is over. “I talked to other people and they say that it is what it is,” she said. “This is what is happening in the US. I am glad to have a job. I definitely think there should be a bigger fight. I think we should fight for the basic rights workers need, like pensions and health care. I think it is possible to get everyone together.”

Gus told the WSWS, “It is the whole country. The economic problem started here and is all over the place. And who is paying for it? If we can’t pay our mortgage, they take our house. They knew what they were doing and they got bailed out. You have to change the world. Occupy Wall Street had the right idea but they were not organized.”

John, another Con Ed employee, declared, “We do all the work, we create everything. You work for a company for your whole life and you get nothing in return. The weekly pay is not enough. I did the Occupy Wall Street last year. We walked across the Brooklyn Bridge. What good came out of that? People were getting beat up by the police but the 1 percent were still making their money.”



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