

Airgas workers in New England walk out over health care and pensions

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Workers at the Airgas facility in East Greenwich, Rhode Island, have been on strike since May 30 to defend their health care and pension benefits. The truck drivers and gas cylinder fillers have been working without a contract since April.

Airgas is the largest American distributor of industrial, medical and specialty gases, and one of the largest distributors of welding, safety and related products. In November 2015, Airgas was acquired by France's Air Liquide in a \$13.4 billion deal.

While the pickets first targeted Rhode Island locations, last Thursday and Friday workers traveled to Airgas facilities in Hingham and Billerica, Massachusetts; Salem, New Hampshire; and Bangor, Maine. According to a statement released Friday by Teamsters Local 251, members of Teamsters locals in those locations were not crossing the picket lines.

The company has been conducting a cost-cutting campaign to boost its share value and payout to wealthy investors. In its latest quarterly report, Air Liquide boasted of saving \$45 million in "synergies" from the acquisition, a euphemism for job cuts, including in its back office operations. The company's revenues in the first three months of this year are up 38.5 percent from the same period last year, to 5.17 billion euros (US \$5.83 billion). Rather than returning this money to workers in France, the US or anywhere else in the form of benefits, it is paying a stock dividend of 2.60 euros per share this year. According to Air Liquide's web site, its dividend has risen by an average of 8.6 percent annually over the last 30 years.

In 2015, Airgas carried out a two-day lockout of workers in Hingham, Massachusetts before the Teamsters accepted a three-year concessions deal. In March 2016, the Teamsters called a one-day strike at an Airgas facility in Cincinnati, Ohio after keeping

workers on the job more than three months after the expiration of their contract expired. In that case, Airgas has unilaterally terminated workers' 401(k) retirement funds.

While the Teamsters has carried out largely ceremonial picketing, the union has told workers to rely on appeals to shareholders and the National Labor Relations Board, along with a thinly veiled anti-French campaign. In a statement, the Teamsters said company violated federal labor law by attempting to bargain directly with workers.

Aside from two press releases issued by Local 251 last week and a Facebook page, no news about the strike has been made public. A call to Teamsters Local 25 in Boston by a WSWs reporter seeking information was not returned.

There is enormous potential to mobilize broader support for Airgas workers throughout the working class in Rhode Island and, more broadly, New England. The company sells gases and cryogenics to large institutions throughout the region, including hospitals, universities, welders, energy companies, and breweries.

Rhode Island Hospital, Newport Hospital, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (where Airgas has a monopoly on cryogen sales by means of a "preferred vendor" contract), and defense contractor Raytheon are among the hundreds of Airgas customers whose workers face a common enemy: management and Boards of Directors seeking to deny them good health care and a secure retirement. Airgas itself has 17,000 workers in the United States.



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