

National Grid cuts off healthcare for locked-out workers in Massachusetts

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National Grid has cut off healthcare payments for more than 1,200 members of United Steelworkers (USW) Locals 12003 and 12012 who were locked out on June 25 after contract negotiations broke down. As of July 1, workers are no longer getting health insurance through the UK-owned energy giant.

The locked out gas workers serve more than 85 cities and towns across Massachusetts. Talks broke down between the unions and the multibillion-dollar energy company over its demands for cuts in pensions and other benefits for new hires, cuts to healthcare to all workers, plus the ability to bring in more contractors.

The energy company locked out workers when the union would not agree to a no-strike clause in their contract, despite the union locals' offer to have workers continue to work without a contract. The company is continuing operations with a "comprehensive workers contingency plan," deploying management personnel and contractors and threatening public safety due to the dangerous nature of working with live gas lines.

The company has cut off healthcare benefits in an effort to force the workers back to work. In a statement, National Grid said, "During the time they are not working on our property or for our customers, the locals are ineligible for compensation and benefits from the company."

National Grid is targeting the "lavish" health care benefits of this section of workers. "We are proud of the generous wages benefits that we provide to our employees in Massachusetts," a company spokesperson said. "We are also aware that those costs are ultimately passed on to our ratepayers, so they must be reasonable and consistent with the marketplace. Currently, employees in these two unions, unlike the overwhelming majority of our unionized employees in

Massachusetts and other states, enjoy health insurance plans with no deductible."

Also inconsistent with the marketplace, in the company's view, are pension benefits. National Grid is looking to eliminate pensions benefits for new hires and ultimately get rid of them for all workers.

While feigning concern for its customers, National Grid is also seeking tens of millions of dollars from Massachusetts consumers in its upcoming rate case. The company also received a major tax cut as a result of the Trump administration's corporate tax cut package.

In response to the healthcare cutoff, the union is trying to use its emergency medical plan for members, which only covers emergencies, and to help workers register with MassHealth, the state's version of Obamacare. As older workers face the prospect of mounting bills for medical care for themselves and their families, or going without care, the United Steelworkers union sits on a Strike and Defense Fund valued at more than \$500 million.

Local 12012 President John Buonopane told MassLive that the company's cutoff of health care was "shameful." "Working for this company," he said, "you're just a number," adding, that the company has "no kind of loyalty." Meanwhile, the USW has responded to this and other attacks on members' jobs, wages and benefits, not by mobilizing the support of its membership numbering more than 860,000—the largest union in North America—but by backing Donald Trump's "America First" nationalism.

Current USW President Leo Gerard, along with the head of United Auto Workers and other unions, have lined up behind Trump's viciously anti-working class, protectionist policies that pit US workers against their brothers and sisters in the European Union, Canada,

China, Mexico and other countries. Gerard has praised Trump's tariffs on imported steel and aluminum, claiming they will be a boon for US steelworkers.

In a petition addressed to Trump on the USW website they write, "Because of imports from countries like China and Russia, many steelmakers have closed plants, laid off workers or gone out of business entirely, forcing our country to become more and more dependent on foreign materials to build our military equipment, including aircraft carriers and tanks, as well as our critical infrastructure like our water systems, bridges and energy grids."

The USW's support for Trump's imposition of tariffs this spring on steel and aluminum makes them complicit in the trade war being stoked by his administration, with Canada retaliating by imposing tariffs of \$12 billion worth of US exports.

The USW's support for Trump's policies have not stopped them from garnering support from the other big business party. The Democratic Party-dominated Boston City Council sent a letter to Marcy Reed, Massachusetts president of National Grid USA, imploring the company that has locked out its workers to "bargain in good faith" and for the union and management to "approach such contract negotiations with a spirit of fairness and compromise."

Sens. Elizabeth Warren and Ed Markey, Rep. Joseph Kennedy and Massachusetts Secretary of State Bill Galvin have all called on National Grid to return to the bargaining table. These calls will have little impact on National Grid, which saw a pretax profit of \$3.66 billion for the year ended March 31, up by 24 percent over the previous year. They expect US business to continue to do well, while their UK business is also on track to outperform.

If this struggle is not to be betrayed and defeated by the unions as so many other have been, National Grid workers must take the conduct of the battle into their own hands through the election of rank-and-file committees to mobilize the broadest sections of the working class behind their fight.



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