Boston rally supports locked-out National Grid workers

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At least 1,000 locked-out National Grid workers and their supporters rallied at Government Center in Boston and marched to the Massachusetts State House Wednesday afternoon. More than 1,200 workers in United Steelworkers Locals 12003 and 12012 were locked out by the multimillion-dollar energy giant on June 25 after contract negotiations broke down. On July 1, the company stopped paying for workers' health insurance.

Participants at the rally included members of other USW locals, the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees, the Teamsters, the Hotel & Food Service Union, and many others. The spirited nature of the rally and the solidarity expressed for the struggle of the locked-out workers stood in contrast to the bankrupt perspective of the USW leadership. The USW has directed workers toward futile appeals to big business politicians to pressure National Grid to bargain in good faith. Meanwhile it has refused to mobilize broader support in the working class behind the locked-out workers.

The USW leadership, however, has not sought to mobilize the support of workers and National Grid customers, the majority of them workers themselves, but instead called the rally to let worker anger dissipate through futile appeals to Massachusetts politicians, including Republican Governor Charlie Baker.

Among those at the rally was Democratic Boston Mayor Marty Walsh, who postured as a defender of the locked-out workers, offering empty phrases of support while calling on National Grid to settle with the USW.

National Grid locked out workers when the union would not agree to a no-strike clause in their contract, despite the union's offer to have workers continue on the job without a contract. The company was well prepared and has deployed over 600 skilled contractors and nearly 700 National Grid management employees, as well as "experienced gas workers from New York and Rhode Island who have been specifically trained for their contingency roles," the company told MassLive.

The locked-out National Grid workers serve more than 85 cities and towns across Massachusetts. The company's territory also covers Rhode Island along with large swaths of upstate New York, Queens, Brooklyn, Staten Island and Long Island. There are some 20 million people residing in its area of operations.

National Grid, one of the largest privately-owned utility companies in the world, reported operating profits of $4.58 billion for fiscal year 2018, an increase of 9 percent over the previous year. Yet the company is seeking deep cuts to health care and pensions, and the right to bring in more contractors. They are demanding that new hires receive defined contribution plans and 401(k)s with company-matching contributions instead of pensions. Workers feel that the attack on new hires' pensions would be a "gateway" into pension cuts for existing workers.

The company has targeted Local 12003 and 12012 workers' health care plans because they are largely without deductibles and co-pays. They have proposed to replace these plans with the choice of a Preferred Provider Organization (PPO) plan—with an annual deductible of $250 for an individual or $500 for a family, with co-insurance of 5 percent and monthly premiums—or a cut-rate Consumer Directed Health Plan, including higher deductibles and lower premiums.

The company's attack on locked-out workers' health care was foremost in the minds of those attending Wednesday's rally. John, a member of Local 12003 with 12 years at National Grid, attended with his wife

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Trisha and their children.

"I am able to be on my wife's insurance," he said. "But I know people who have had spouses with cancer and kids with cancer and I can't imagine what I would do. I don't know what they're going to do to come up with the money to pay all those bills.

"From what we've been told, they had a discussion yesterday, but nothing was resolved. They didn't get anywhere and they're just going back and forth. That's why we're here."

Steelworkers representatives met Tuesday with National Grid for only the second time since late June. Neither side has released details of their discussions, but National Grid appears to be standing firm in their drive to slash workers' benefits, saying in a statement, "National Grid remains committed to bargaining in good faith to reach a fair and equitable solution—as soon as possible—that balances the needs of our employees and customers."

The USW leadership allowed its membership to be locked out, rather than call a strike, by agreeing to work without a contract after the contract expiration. The lockout comes at a time of the year when the demand for natural gas is much reduced, providing the company with more leverage. The company was well prepared with management and contractors to take workers' places in the field.

National Grid above all is relying on the USW to suppress any opposition to concessions and a broader unification of the working class behind the locked-out workers.

The isolation of the National Grid workers follows a long pattern. In 2016, the USW rammed through a concessionary contract at Allegheny Technologies Inc., ending a lockout by more than 2,000 ATI workers in six states. The USW systematically isolated the ATI workers and settled for a contract that included thousands of dollars in increased out-of-pocket health care costs for current and retired workers, an effective wage cut, and a large-scale expansion of outside contractors—concessions differing only slightly from what ATI demanded at the beginning of the lockout.

The USW has not sought to mobilize support from its 12,000 members employed across the company, or from the 4,700 power workers in New York organized in the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 97. They also fear any link-up between the struggle of National Grid workers and 250,000 United Parcel Service workers battling a sellout agreement by the Teamsters.

In opposition to the trade union bureaucrats, National Grid workers must begin to organize rank-and-file workplace committees to mobilize broader support in the working class to break the isolation of their struggle. They must reject any contract that fails to meet their demands, including full health care coverage with no copays, the expansion of pension coverage and the defense of all jobs.

Workers must reject the political orientation of the USW to the Democrats and advance an independent political strategy. The allies of National Grid workers are not the Democratic and Republican politicians, but the masses of workers across the power industry, telecom and transport as well as municipal workers, teachers and other sections of the working class. This great social force must be mobilized in a fight against the entire corporate political set-up.

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