

National Grid's lockout of Massachusetts gas workers in third month

John Marion
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National Grid's lockout of some 1,200 gas workers belonging to United Steelworkers (USW) locals 12012 and 12003 is now in its third month. The workers have suffered through the summer with no pay, health insurance that is either nonexistent, inadequate or exorbitantly expensive, and isolation from other sections of workers, which has been enforced by the USW.

The tactics of the two locals have consisted of legal maneuvering, scattered pickets, and appeals to corporate-controlled politicians. The only significant protests so far have been a July 18 rally in Boston, which was joined by other union workers and had about 1,000 attendees, and the locked-out workers' presence at the Boston Labor Day rally.

On Labor Day in Boston, John Buonopane, president of United Steelworkers Local 12012, one of the two locked-out locals, appealed to Massachusetts' Republican governor, Charlie Baker, to intervene in the lockout, saying, "Gov. Baker hasn't said a word about National Grid workers being locked out for 11 weeks." He added this chauvinist plea, "National Grid is a foreign company, based in the United Kingdom. We are Massachusetts workers locked out of our jobs and Gov. Baker hasn't said (anything) about it. That shouldn't happen in Massachusetts."

The contract that expired on June 24 had a no strike/no lockout clause, and the company jumped on the June 24 expiration to implement the lockout. A week later, on July 1, it stopped paying for the workers' health insurance. Those locked out have had to apply for Medicaid or insurance with premiums as high as \$2,500 per month.

National Grid's demands for the next contract include replacing the defined benefit pension with a 401(K) plan, cutting the company's health insurance

contribution by forcing workers into plans with deductibles, and the contracting of work—including meter replacements—to third parties. National Grid is offering a measly salary increase of 14 percent over a five-year contract.

The company's pretax profit for the year ending March 31 was \$3.66 billion, up nearly 25 percent from the previous year. The December 2017, US corporate tax cuts resulted in a credit that increased post-tax profits to more than \$4.8 billion. While the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities has issued a directive that utilities companies pass on some of this tax cut to customers, National Grid is nonetheless asking for government approval of a double-digit rate hike.

Numerous safety violations have been reported during the lockout, and at least 18 cities and towns have refused or delayed permits for new projects. The municipalities have voiced concern about the safety of work done by scabs but are also concerned about growing worker discontent.

The safety violations committed by scabs have included excavating within 200 feet of a high-pressure regulator pit with no inspector present, making emergency valves inaccessible by filling around them with sand, and creating a "backdoor" entrance to its Malden facility so that contractors can avoid picketers. This "backdoor" results in pickup trucks driving over a 700-pound pressurized gas line that is protected only by a steel plate.

At the Labor Day rally, workers spoke out about the impact of the lockout. Rocky Leo told the *Everett Independent*, "They're banking on us not getting by—we workers going under and losing our health care and defaulting on our mortgages, so we have to get in. It's a struggle. It's been 11 weeks since we were

locked out. It's really hard on many of us and that's their strategy. They figure we'll give in."

He added, "Five days in they took our health care away. We had a guy who had just had his leg amputated, and people with diabetes who needed care and children who are being treated for cancer. That's what we have here."

As 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. According to the union's web site, the USW fund only pays out \$200 per worker to local unions each week.

Since the lockout began, union leaders have been pushing the false hope that Governor Baker and Boston Mayor Marty Walsh would intervene on behalf of workers. Now, nearly three months later, that approach has resulted only in the promise of a September 11 meeting between Baker and Local 12003 President Joe Kirylo. Kirylo's Twitter page contains little more than appeals to Baker and a photo of himself with Elizabeth Warren.

A June 26 letter from the Boston City Council to National Grid is more to the point: "All parties, workers and management alike, [should] approach such contract negotiations with a spirit of fairness and compromise. We are concerned that any delays in the collective bargaining process could result in work stoppages, lock outs and/or other labor related actions that would diminish service in large segments of the Commonwealth."

It goes without saying that were the locked-out workers to join their brothers and sisters in a general strike the Boston City Council would no longer concern itself with "fairness and compromise."

About the token picketing being organized by Locals 12003 and 12012, one frustrated National Grid worker told the *Independent* that "the word is just not getting out there for whatever reason ... They're winning because they have more money and more advertising and we're standing here walking in circles. There are more cops here than us."

The United Steelworkers have some 850,000 members in North America but is strangling and isolating the struggle at National Grid. In a display of the growing militancy of the working class in the

United States, rank-and-file workers at US Steel plants across the country cast a series of unanimous strike votes last week.

The USW conducted strike authorization votes after announcing it would to extend current labor agreements beyond their expiration dates while continuing contract talks with US Steel and ArcelorMittal. The contracts, which were due to expire September 1, cover 15,000 US Steel workers and 16,000 ArcelorMittal workers at mills and other facilities in Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, Alabama, Minnesota and other states.

Last week, local union chapters across the country announced that rank-and-file members had voted unanimously to strike at US Steel plants, in spite of the company's attempt to coax workers with signing bonuses of thousands of dollars.

Instead of uniting the struggles of steelworkers at US Steel, ArcelorMittal and National Grid, the union is seeking to sabotage any strike action among steelworkers and to isolate the locked-out National Grid workers. The USW has resorted to a toothless appeal to the National Labor Relations Board to declare the lockout illegal.

The Socialist Equality Party urges National Grid workers to form rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the USW. These committees should reach out to other steelworkers, teachers, UPS workers, autoworkers and other sections of the working class to prepare a common counteroffensive against the corporate and financial elite.



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