

Seven-month National Grid lockout ends with USW-backed concessions

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More than 1,200 natural gas distribution workers in Massachusetts who were locked out by National Grid seven months ago began returning to work Sunday. The end of the lockout follows a January 7 vote by members of United Steelworkers Locals 12012 and 12003 to ratify a concessions contract.

Few details of the contract have been released publicly but raises will total only 18 percent over the six years it covers. This is below the annual rate of inflation in the Boston area, which is around 3.2 percent. The raises are essentially the same as management's final offer of 2.5-3 percent before the lockout.

While the previous contract provided for health insurance with no deductibles or co-insurance, the Boston Globe reported that the new agreement allows the company to reduce this benefit by an "undetermined amount" starting in 2021. New hires will receive a 401(K) employee-contribution pension plan instead of the legacy defined benefit plan paid by management. The company will match a worker's contributions to the 401(K) plan, but will use an arcane formula that provides for higher percentages as a worker gets older; absurdly, the chart shows a match of 9% of eligible pay for workers 85 years of age and older.

The lockout began on June 25, one day after the previous contract—which had contained a no strike/no lockout clause—expired. On July 1, the company stopped paying for the health insurance of the locked-out workers.

The USW, which has 850,000 members in North America—including 15,000 at ArcelorMittal and 16,000 at US Steel who were recently forced to accept USW-backed concessions contracts—isolated the 1,200 embattled workers for seven months. Far from

mobilizing USW members or other sections of workers against the giant company, the USW sought to cover its betrayal by organizing impotent protests, which appealed to investors and corporate-controlled politicians.

In one of many examples, USW District 4 Director John Shinn sent a letter to National Grid shareholders, including Morgan Stanley and State Street Corp., on October 1, offering polite advice about the company's reputation. "National Grid's stock has already fallen by close to 12% and to a one-year low since early July. The actions of the Board of Directors and the CEO are contributing to a loss in National Grid's value," the union wrote.

This was combined with economic nationalism and anti-foreigner agitation. At a Labor Day rally, for example, Local 12012 president John Buonopane said, "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."

These chauvinist rants did not stop the USW officers from traveling to an investors meeting in Birmingham, England to grovel before rich financiers. During the July 30 meeting Buonopane told chairman Sir Peter Oliver Gershon, "we want a good relationship with this company," Bloomberg News reported, adding, "It's very unfortunate that you had to do this. Because you didn't have to do it."

During the lockout, Locals 12003 and 12012 lobbied the Democrat-controlled state legislature to pass a bill extending unemployment benefits beyond 30 weeks. In the end, National Grid had to pay nothing for this extension, which would have taken effect on January 14.

According to state government figures, 200 families had to turn to Medicaid for insurance during the lockout. In addition to the workers themselves, these families contain more than 300 other people, many of them children. One hundred households with a total number of 340 people had to turn to food stamps during the month of October.

The USW's tactics also included lodging more than 100 complaints with the Department of Public Utilities (DPU) about safety violations by scabs. In a tepid response, the DPU wrote to the company that "it appears that National Grid may have failed to follow proper procedures on several occasions and may be in violation of ... the federal pipeline safety regulations." The department threatened an "additional investigation" if the company did not respond in 30 days.

Predictably such appeals to state authorities did not advance workers' interests an iota. According to the Violation Tracker at www.goodjobsfirst.org, National Grid has paid only \$55,000 in fines for safety violations in Massachusetts since 2000 and one fine of \$9,000 in New Hampshire. In comparison, its after-tax profits were nearly \$5 billion for the year ending March 31, 2018, including a credit of more than \$2 billion from the US federal tax cuts passed in December 2017.

The promotion of the Democrats became so all-consuming that, after the contract ratification, the USW released a statement saying, "we want to thank all of our elected officials, including Governor Baker, Attorney General Healey, Secretary of State Galvin, Senators Warren and Markey and our whole Congressional delegation, Speaker DeLeo, Senate President Spilka, Boston Mayor Marty Walsh, our local mayors and town officials, the Massachusetts AFL-CIO, the Greater Boston Labor Council, and all of our union and community partners for their tremendous support."

This miserable outcome of the National Grid lockout follows an unbroken string of betrayals by the USW dating back to the late 1970s and early 1980s, when it collaborated with the steel bosses in the systematic dismantling of the steel industry. Back then, just like today, the USW railed against "foreign owned steelmakers" even as the USW imposed sweeping wage and benefit cuts and gave the green light to the closure of steel mills and the elimination of hundreds of

thousands of jobs. The USW has been one of the biggest supporters of Trump's trade war measures and military provocations against China.

Some 30,000 oil refinery workers at Shell and other oil giants face a February 1 expiration date for the labor agreements signed by the USW after its betrayal of the 2015 strike by over 6,000 workers at 11 refineries. The bitter experience at National Grid and countless other struggles isolated and defeated by the USW underscores the need for the building of rank-and-file committees, which are democratically controlled by workers and independent of the corporate-controlled USW.



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