

United States

Duquesne Light workers enter second week of strike in Pittsburgh over safety, wages and benefits

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8 October 2026

Duquesne Light workers: What are the most important issues in your strike? Contact the World Socialist Web Site to tell us about your working conditions, safety concerns, and what you are fighting for.

More than 900 electric utility workers at Duquesne Light Company in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, have entered the second week of a strike, the first strike at Duquesne Light in 58 years, fighting dangerous working conditions, chronic understaffing, inadequate wages, and threats to their healthcare and retirement benefits.

On September 15, workers voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike by a margin of 592-14.

The workers, members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 29, walked out at midnight on October 1 after negotiations failed to produce a new contract. Picket lines have been established at company facilities throughout the Pittsburgh region. On Wednesday, approximately 400 striking workers and supporters rallied outside the utility's Woods Run facility on Pittsburgh's North Side.

Safety and understaffing lie at the heart of the strike. Workers say they regularly put in 60 to 80 hours a week maintaining high-voltage power lines, substations, and underground electrical equipment, which creates dangerous conditions.

A June 2026 Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission (PUC) audit found that many field employees were working approximately one-and-a-half times their regular hours. Much of this overtime involved scheduled work rather than emergencies, indicating that additional hiring could reduce the excessive workload.

The heavy demands on utility workers were evident during a series of extreme weather events this year. In March, a powerful windstorm left approximately 163,000 Duquesne Light customers without electricity, requiring extensive emergency repairs. On September 3, another storm, with winds exceeding 70 miles per hour, knocked out power to roughly 60,000 customers. The company called in 240 additional utility workers from as far away as Alabama, Florida, and Quebec to assist with restoration. Forecasts call for another round of potentially heavy storms in

western Pennsylvania this weekend, which could cause significant damage.

Pittsburgh also experienced two periods of extreme heat in late June and July, with heat-index readings exceeding 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Duquesne Light warned that sustained high temperatures could strain the electrical grid and cause outages, and it announced increased staffing to handle emergencies. Such conditions underscore the importance of adequate staffing and properly rested, experienced crews to maintain and restore an essential public service.

The utility increased its field workforce from 541 in 2021 to 609 at the end of 2025. Duquesne Light has offered to hire another 120 union-represented workers, including lineworkers, mechanics, and customer service representatives, although it remains unclear whether this would adequately address the staffing shortages.

The problems are longstanding. A 2015 regulatory audit found workers averaging 11 hours of overtime per week, with overtime accounting for more than one-fifth of the hours worked in the operations examined.

The company's own safety figures show OSHA-recordable incidents increasing from 20 to 34 over a five-year period, a rise of 70 percent. In April 2026, OSHA also cited Duquesne Light after a safety interlock failed to operate as designed during switching operations on a 345,000-volt electrical system at its Arsenal Substation. OSHA classified the violation as other-than-serious and imposed no fine.

Workers have also raised concerns about inaccurate electrical system maps and delays in receiving instructions from control-room personnel, which could expose crews to dangerous electrical hazards. In September, 340 workers signed a letter to Duquesne Light CEO Kevin Walker expressing no confidence in senior management's handling of workplace safety and operations.

Duquesne Light's publicly reported contract proposal includes a 4 percent wage increase in the first year, followed by increases of 3.25 percent in each of the next two years, along with a one-time \$3,000 ratification bonus. Compounded, the increases would total approximately 10.85 percent over three years. Meanwhile, consumer prices have risen by more than 30 percent since

September 2019, substantially increasing the cost of living for workers and their families.

Workers want substantial wage increases, not only to recover lost purchasing power but also to reflect their growing skills, experience, and productivity. A full cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) is also necessary to protect those gains against future inflation, but the IBEW leadership has not publicly advanced a demand for COLA.

Healthcare, retiree healthcare, and retirement benefits also remain unresolved in negotiations. Although the specific proposals have not been made public, the dispute raises the question of how much of the rising cost of healthcare the company intends to shift onto workers and retirees.

Last-minute agreements in 2019 and 2023 had prevented earlier strikes. The previous three-year contract expired at midnight on September 30, and workers walked off the job immediately at midnight on October 1 rather than continuing to work without an agreement.

Workers have established picket lines at Duquesne Light facilities throughout the Pittsburgh region, including Woods Run and Preble Avenue on the North Side, Penn Hills, McKeesport, and Ambridge. Strikers are rotating through six-hour shifts to maintain round-the-clock pickets. The walkout includes lineworkers, mechanics, troubleshooters, and customer service representatives.

Negotiations have continued during the strike. IBEW Local 29 officials have reported preliminary agreements on subcontracting and technology, although the terms have not been made public. The union leadership is seeking a settlement it can bring to the membership, despite continuing disagreements over wages, safety, and benefits.

Duquesne Light has continued operating during the strike, using nonunion employees and outside contractors to perform work normally carried out by union members. The company maintains that these arrangements are necessary to ensure uninterrupted electrical service, including emergency repairs. But by using replacement labor to do the work of striking employees, Duquesne Light is undermining the strike and attempting to weaken workers' ability to fight for better wages, benefits, and working conditions.

A privately owned utility controlled by major investors

Duquesne Light provides an essential public service, supplying electricity to more than 600,000 customers in Pittsburgh and surrounding communities in Allegheny and Beaver counties. Yet the utility is owned by major international investment and pension funds whose investments are driven by the pursuit of financial returns.

The company, publicly traded until 2007, is now owned by a consortium of investors. Singapore's sovereign wealth fund GIC holds a 44.4 percent interest in Duquesne Light's parent company, DQE Holdings LLC. Other major investors include Manulife Investment Management, the Dutch pension investor PGGM, and

the California State Teachers' Retirement System.

Although the company does not make its complete financial statements freely available to the public, it has secured successive increases in electricity rates. In December 2024, Pennsylvania regulators approved a distribution rate increase providing approximately \$53 million in additional annual revenue. In June 2025, higher electricity supply prices added about \$9.46 to the monthly bill of a typical residential customer. On October 1, the day the strike began, Duquesne Light raised its Distribution System Improvement Charge from 2.17 percent to 3.36 percent.

The company is also preparing to meet growing electricity demand from large industrial customers, including data centers. Such facilities require substantial electrical infrastructure, including substations and transmission equipment, which increases the importance of an adequately staffed and experienced workforce.

The issues confronting Duquesne Light workers (chronic understaffing, dangerous working conditions, declining purchasing power, and attacks on healthcare and retirement benefits) are shared by utility workers and other sections of the working class throughout the country.

Yet the IBEW leadership has left Duquesne Light workers isolated, without seeking to mobilize electrical utility workers at other companies in support of the strike. Union officials are seeking a settlement with management while the company continues operating with strikebreakers.

Duquesne Light workers need to take the initiative by building their own rank-and-file committee, democratically controlled by the workers themselves, to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. This committee should discuss and advance demands based on what workers actually need and appeal for active support from utility workers and other sections of the working class.

Such a committee would insist that the full terms of any proposed agreement be released to all workers, with sufficient time for discussion and debate before a vote. Above all, it would fight to break the isolation of the strike and appeal broadly to other utility workers and workers in other industries for a common struggle for safe working conditions, adequate staffing, substantial wage increases, a full COLA, and secure healthcare and retirement benefits.



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