

DTE Energy forces strike by tree trimmers

By Lawrence Porter and James Brewer
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Six hundred tree trimmers employed by subcontractors of the Michigan utility monopoly DTE Energy are on strike after being locked out at 11:59 Tuesday night. The workers, members of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 17, had set a strike deadline for Wednesday after working under an extended contract since January 1.

At issue are holiday and vacation pay for the workers that do the dangerous work of clearing tree branches and brush from utility lines. On the picket line in Redford, Michigan, Joe Atkinson told the WSWS, “We just want to keep our holiday and vacation pay that the companies want to take away.” Another worker explained that the holiday pay was won 15 years ago in the 1990s in exchange for a wage increase. “Edison told the companies they had to pay the benefits and they decided they were not going to pay it.”

Officially, the strike is not against DTE, but against the five subcontractors who employ the tree trimmers—Davey Tree Expert, Nelson Tree Service, Kappen Tree Service, N.G. Gilbert and ABC Professional Tree Service. However, DTE had initially bankrolled the vacation and holiday benefits by means of a “pass-through” arrangement with the subcontractors, which the energy giant has recently withdrawn.

Kevin Shaffer, business manager of IBEW Local 17 confirmed the dispute was over holiday and vacation benefits. “It involves two weeks vacation and 11 paid holidays,” stated Shaffer, a benefit the union won in the 1990s. “We can’t agree on a value for the extended benefits. The companies want a lower percentage that we cannot agree on.”

“They also want to freeze wages for two years,” added Shaffer. “Already a section of workers have had a wage freeze for the last 3 years,” he added, referring to apprentices who start at \$12.58 an hour.

“There was a pass-through arrangement with DTE

whereby DTE paid the companies for the work our workers did,” stated Shaffer. “However, the workers were paid through the five companies’ payroll.”

He acknowledged that the force behind the cut in benefits was DTE, however, he made it clear the union would not picket DTE.

Shaffer said Nelson and Davey are bringing in replacement workers to do the work of the tree trimmers while they strike. Asked when they plan to start, he admitted they have already begun. At least one crew from Nelson was brought in from Ohio to do the work of the tree trimmers on the west side of Detroit.

When asked what the union planned to do about the replacement workers Shaffer said he had not discussed it at this point with the other utility unions.

“We are picketing the job sites now and we plan to take whatever measures are needed to fight it.”

At a press conference Wednesday morning, DTE Energy assured that its tree trimming subcontractors would “meet service obligations” in the face of imminent storm threats. Forecasts from the National Weather Service called for violent storms and high winds this week. No time was lost in dispatching non-union crews from out of state to do the work of the strikers. (See photos.)

The WSWS went to one of the job sites where the Nelson Tree company brought tree trimmers from Ohio to scab on the strikers.

While the five companies are sub-contractors for DTE Energy, the union negotiated a contract with all five simultaneously. The contract expired on January 1, 2010, however the union maintained an extended contract over the past 6 months. Workers told the WSWS the union finally set a strike deadline a few weeks ago, after the rank-and-file overwhelmingly supported strike action.

Picketing workers told us that line workers, also members of IBEW 17, have been working with a

contract extension after the contract expired in December 2009. DTE Energy workers in the Utility Workers Union of America (UWUA) Local 223 are presently voting on a contract with DTE that will not be completed until July 1. The UWUA—the largest DTE union, with 3,900 workers—called off a potential strike earlier this month and signed the deal, which was hailed by the company for cutting costs.

“This is not acceptable to us,” stated one of the pickets while the strikebreakers were doing their work. “We risk our lives every day and this is how the company treats us.”

The strike by tree trimmers and the demand for concessions by utility workers takes place as the energy giant, with the full sanction of state regulators, continues to shut off utilities to hundreds of thousands of residents in Michigan, where nearly half the people say an immediate family member has lost a job in the past two years, according to a new Detroit Free Press/WXYZ-TV poll. DTE has discontinued gas and electrical service to 84,000 households since the beginning of the year, the Michigan Public Service Commission reports, while the state’s other energy conglomerate, Consumers Energy, has cut off another 77,000 households for non-payment.

This underscores the need for a common struggle by DTE workers and the victims of its shutoff policies.

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