

Plymouth, New Hampshire electrical workers strike to defend pensions

By John Marion
12 May 2018

On Monday 80 linemen and five warehouse workers went on strike at the New Hampshire Electric Cooperative (NHEC) in Plymouth. The workers' contract expired on April 30 and they are refusing to give in to management's attack on their pension plan. According to the web site of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 1837, all five of the warehouse workers and 79 of the linemen voted in favor of strike action. However, by Tuesday NHEC had already brought in scabs.

In a statement Monday NHEC declared it "has activated a contingency plan that will provide for adequate coverage of power outages and protect public safety. Certified line crews have been engaged and will be accompanied on any outage calls by non-union NHEC employees who are familiar with the service territory."

Despite this threat, the IBEW has done nothing to mobilize telecom and power workers behind the strikers. Instead it has worked to isolate the workers, making sure they battle alone.

Workers at NHEC are eligible for both a defined benefit pension plan and a small amount of matching if they contribute to a separate 401(K). According to the Cooperative's 2017 audited financial statements its contribution of \$2.4 million to the defined benefit plan for 2017 was only 5 percent of total employer funding for the year. Because the plan is multi-employer, pooled contributions cover all eligible employees no matter where they work.

The NHEC limit on matching 401(K) contributions for IBEW members is only 2.5 percent, while non-union staff—whose jobs are not as dangerous as those of linemen—receive matching of up to 4.5 percent.

The workers have gone out because management is demanding the authority to modify the pension plans in

the future without negotiating the changes. NHEC also wants to raise the age of eligibility for full retirement benefits from 62 to 65.

The maximum hourly pay for a lineman under the recently expired union contract is \$38.97.

The company serves 83,000 residents across 115 towns and is tied with Utilitas as the state's second largest electric company.

Although the NHEC is established as a not-for-profit cooperative under New Hampshire law and is exempt from federal income taxes, its executives are paid lavishly. According to its Form 990, President and Chief Executive Officer Steven Camerino received salary of nearly \$354,000 and "other compensation" of more than \$86,000 in 2016. When salary and "other compensation" are combined, the Vice President of Financial Services, Vice President of Corporate Services, Vice President of Operations and Engineering, Vice President of Member Services & Community Relations, and Vice president of Power Resource & Access each earned \$200,000 or more.

The members of the Board of Directors, who receive yearly stipends of between \$15,000 and \$20,000 for their "service," include executives from BNY Mellon and Citizens Bank, a commercial realtor, and a "former Fortune 100 executive" with past experience at Honeywell and United Technologies.

Approximately 1,600 workers at 13 electricity generation and distribution companies in New Hampshire and Maine are members of IBEW Local 1837. It bargains separately with each employer, and its largest shop is Central Maine Power. It has not allowed a strike by its members in more than 30 years.

This week the Local's "support" of its members consisted of a small rally on Friday morning and a flyer asking supporters to donate \$25 supermarket or gas

station gift cards to the strikers.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>