

FirstEnergy and Penelec Continue Lockout despite Dangerous Winter Storm

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Altoona, Pa. Utility Workers Union of America System Local 102 today strongly criticized the ongoing lockout of nearly 150 utility workers by Pennsylvania electric utility Penelec and its parent company FirstEnergy, despite harsh winter weather throughout the company's service territory and the entire northeastern U.S.

The company flatly rejected the union's proposal during negotiations on January 2 to immediately return all locked out workers to their jobs, despite the impending onset of a major winter storm threatening the public with risks of power outages from heavy snow and ice and temperatures plunging to below zero.

³It is nothing short of reckless for FirstEnergy to continue to lock out skilled first responders in the middle of a dangerous winter storm,² declared System Local 102 President Bob Whalen. ³This company has shown utter contempt for its customers by continuing this unnecessary lockout, merely to pad corporate profits at the expense of public safety.²

FirstEnergy and Penelec locked out the workers three days before Thanksgiving as part of a corporate scheme to impose cutbacks in customer service standards and concessions in employee working conditions and benefits. The locked out workers include linemen, substation electricians, garage mechanics, layout technicians, and meter readers at company worksites in Altoona, Lewistown, and Shippensburg, Pa.

Top management in Akron ordered the lockout to try to coerce workers into accepting the company's demands for concessions, even though the union has repeatedly offered to continue working while the parties negotiate for a new labor agreement. FirstEnergy's cutback demands include scheduling changes that would make it harder for utility crews to respond to emergency outages, as well as other reductions in customer service standards.

Frigid winter weather can severely strain electric power systems throughout an entire region, as weather-related power outages force utilities to scramble to find sufficient skilled workers to restore service. In the event of widespread outages, electric utilities routinely call upon other utility companies to supplement emergency power restoration crews.

³FirstEnergy's selfish conduct places the entire region at risk by keeping 150 skilled utility workers away from their jobs delivering essential public services,² Whalen declared. ³We urge management to immediately end the lockout so that dedicated employees can return to these critical public safety positions.²

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