Protesters Rally at FirstEnergy Meeting in W.Va.

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MORGANTOWN, W.Va. (AP) — At least 200 union workers picketed FirstEnergy Corp.'s annual shareholder meeting in West Virginia on Tuesday, demanding the Ohio-based utility hire enough people to keep the power on without forcing an ever-shrinking labor force to work as many as 1,800 hours of overtime a year.

Chuck Cookson, FirstEnergy executive director of labor relations and safety, said the company is offering an 8.5 percent wage increase over four years as part of the ongoing negotiations for a new contract, but it must have more flexible work rules in exchange so it can respond quickly to outages.

"We provide electric service 24 hours a day, seven days a week," he said, "and we need and require an appropriate response from our employees when we need them."

But Bob Whelan, president of Local 102 of the Utility Workers Union of America, said the number of employees has dropped steadily since 1996, with a 40 percent reduction in the number of linemen, the workers who reset power poles, string lines and restore service after accidents and storms.

Other groups have been hit as hard or worse, Whelan said, including garage mechanics who keep bucket trucks working.

Protesters with Locals 102 and 304 erected a 12-foot inflatable rat outside the Waterfront Place hotel in Morgantown, where they were joined by United Steelworkers and United Mine Workers of America members.

Also protesting were environmental and consumer groups angry over the proposed $1.1 billion sale of a power plant between two FirstEnergy subsidiaries. For West Virginia, it was a rare coalescing of labor and environmental groups, which are often at odds over coal.

"This whole sidewalk should be full, there's so many common issues," said John Christensen, vice president of the Eastern Panhandle Labor Council. He traveled from Martinsburg to show solidarity on several issues, including the reduction of FirstEnergy's work force. "Cutting the workers is indescribable."

Critics say the power plant deal the state Public Service Commission is considering is overvalued, concentrates too heavily on coal and would unfairly raise rates for consumers. FirstEnergy calls it "a reasonable price for protection" against the more expensive option of buying electricity on the spot market to meet West Virginia's demand.

FirstEnergy's contracts with the two locals expired April 30, but members are

working under their previous terms while a new agreement is hammered out.

Local 304 represents the 150 union employees at the Harrison Power station.

Local 102 includes more than 900 employees of West Penn Power, Potomac Edison and FirstEnergy Generation Corp., including line and substation workers, meter readers and technicians, and other physical and support employees.

Most work for West Penn, which serves 720,000 customers in Pennsylvania, and Potomac Edison, which serves 132,000 customers in West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle and about 250,000 customers in Maryland.

Cookson acknowledged the physically demanding work that linemen and others perform in inclement conditions, and their right to fair compensation. Besides wage increases, he said, FirstEnergy is offering Local 102 the chance to participate in an incentive program that could boost straight-time wages by as much as 6 percent.

But it's also proposing to reformulate health care coverage, offering a subsidy to help cover the cost of insurance Local 102 has obtained on its own for decades. That subsidy is comparable to what other employees get, Cookson said, but would result in an increase of about $500 per employee per year.

Whelan said the union doesn't fully understand FirstEnergy's new proposal on health care, but it adamantly opposes a provision that would let the company "amend, modify or discontinue" benefits at will.

FirstEnergy also said it wants changes at its power plants to improve productivity, adjust scheduling and move employees around as needed, Cookson said.

In some job classifications, people can only be scheduled to work Monday through Friday, 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. In most other contracts, the company can adjust schedules as needed between 6 a.m. and 8 p.m.

"We have limits on how much or how many times people are required to respond to overtime, and we'd like to relax those limits so people would be required to respond more frequently," Cookson said. "And really, that's a matter of being more fair because we have some people that work a lot and some people that work very little."

But Whelan said the problem is not unresponsive employees; it's lack of bench strength. Local 102, for example, currently has a contract provision requiring a customer service truck be staffed 24/7 for emergency calls.

FirstEnergy wants a trouble truck designated by shift, so it could stack up multiple calls to a single truck rather than summoning another. Whelan said that would force customers to wait even longer.

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