



PRESSURE FORCES BUFFALO BLUE CROSS TO TALK WITH OPEIU; LOCKOUT CONTINUES

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BUFFALO (PAI)—Public pressure – a mass protest in front of a hall where the company CEO was attending a dinner – forced the Blue Cross Blue Shield affiliate in Buffalo, HealthNow New York, to resume contract talks with Office and Professional Employees Local 212. But its lockout of the 390 workers, all union members, continues.

The talks, scheduled for May 13, were the first bargaining session since the old contract ended and the “non-profit” health care group kicked out its workers at midnight April 25, Business Representative Deana Fox said.

Blue Cross’ demands included giving it unfettered rights to unilaterally change terms on several items that are normally mandatory subjects of bargaining between unions and management, such as 401 (k) accounts and health care. It also wants to outsource workers’ jobs. “In their publicity, they’re saying ‘This is a good deal, and the union should take it,’” Fox added. “It’s a good deal to eliminate your own job?”

“Our main issue is job security” and the lockout represents job insecurity, she added. “They’re looking to subcontract any of our work at any time.”

When it locked the workers out, the Buffalo-area Blue Cross -- an affiliate of the nation’s leading non-profit health insurer -- left them scrambling for unemployment compensation while it cut off their health coverage. Workers who were supposed to get their April 29 paychecks did not. Blue Cross told subscribers service would continue uninterrupted, but the local reports subscribers calling it to report shoddy service.

The lockout led the union to protest on May 10 in front of Kleinhans Music Hall, where Blue Cross’ CEO – who earned \$1.8 million last year, Fox said – was attending a charity dinner to raise money for scholarships for students to attend private schools.

The protest, led by OPEIU President Mike Goodwin, drew strong local labor support and several hundred marchers, Fox said, as workers and families united in favor of the well-paying jobs at Blue Cross, which the organization wants to take away. “I didn’t have to call other unions for backing. They called me,” Fox said.

Local President Caroline Muszynski, in a statement when the lockout began, called it part of the wider war on workers being waged nationwide. “Our members recognize that the attack on working families and the middle class is in full swing and our management has joined the battle to steamroll over union members to get whatever they want, but our members refuse to accept having our jobs outsourced and dehumanized, so we will stand strong in protest of this lockout,” she said. ####