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Tentative deal in hand, union workers at Vermont Yankee vote □

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MONTPELIER — Six days after rejecting a contract offer, union workers at Vermont Yankee nuclear plant were to cast ballots Monday on a new deal with plant owner Entergy Nuclear.

The vote, by about 157 members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 300, came after negotiators worked into the night Friday to reach a tentative contract and avert a possible strike.

George Clain, the union's business manager, wouldn't disclose details of the tentative agreement before the ratification vote.

An earlier tentative agreement was rejected by union members in a vote last Tuesday. On Wednesday, the union gave Entergy the required 72 hours notice that a strike was possible if a new deal was not reached by 3:30 p.m. Saturday.

Vermont Yankee workers have complained that they are the lowest-paid in the nuclear industry. They also have complained about being asked to pay more for health insurance and that their retirement benefits were being reduced.

Plant spokesman Larry Smith didn't immediately return a call about the union vote Monday.

If the union rejects the contract offer again and can't get further concessions from Entergy, the union might step up pressure in part by "discussing some of our safety concerns that we've heard through these negotiations. ... We're taking a very active role on some of these issues that have come up during these negotiations," Clain said.

He declined to specify what the concerns were, saying he wanted to talk first with state regulators and the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

NRC spokesman Neil Sheehan said the agency had a special team assigned to monitor Vermont Yankee in the event of a strike and make sure the plant is properly staffed.

The first vote came the same day as the collapse of one of 22 towers used to cool water taken from the Connecticut River before it is returned to the river. The water is used to cool plant components. By week's end, state officials had ruled out sabotage or terrorism as a cause.

The plant has been reduced to half its usual 610-megawatt power output while repairs are under way.

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