

97

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Yankee union ratifies contract

VERNON — Unionized employees at the Vermont Yankee nuclear plant have a new three-year contract, ending the threat of a strike, according to Entergy Nuclear spokesman Laurence Smith.

Smith said that the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local 300, Unit 8, endorsed the new offer after a meeting late Monday afternoon.

Smith said he got the call from union officials after 6 p.m. Monday.

"We got a deal," Smith said. The second vote, this one successful, came after the 157 unionized workers rejected the company's offer last Tuesday, and set a strike deadline of Saturday afternoon. The new agreement was reached Friday night. The contract expired Aug. 19.

"We're very pleased that they've ratified the tentative agreement. We said all along our goal was to reach an agreement, and I'm delighted we have a positive outcome and now it's back to work," Smith said. There are a total of 500 workers at Vermont Yankee.

Smith said the company and the union agreed not to release the details of the settlement.

Smith refused to comment on a press release from the union at the Pilgrim nuclear power plant last Friday that claimed union workers at Vermont Yankee had concerns about safety.

Gary Sullivan, president of the union at Pilgrim, who was quoted as saying workers have safety concerns, didn't return a call for comment.

Sullivan was quoted as saying, "There are serious issues of public safety surrounding the Vermont Yankee dispute. We cannot allow one bad corporate apple and corporate greed to create a global risk."

The anti-nuclear watchdog group New England Coalition used the union press release as the basis of a petition filed with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission Monday, asking the NRC to investigate the matter immediately, and to hold Vermont Yankee at 50 percent power at the very least.

The coalition pointed to last week's partial collapse of one of its 22 cooling towers as proof of employees' concerns about "degrading plant conditions."

Neil Sheehan, a spokesman for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, said that any such complaints were held in strict confidentiality and he refused any further comment on that issue. But he said the coalition's petition would be handled according to federal regulations.

Workers on an informational picket line last week in Brattleboro said the company wanted

B-52

to give them a very small cost-of-living wage increase, and they said the company wanted to change their health insurance, making deductibles much higher and substantially increasing the cost of health care.

Additionally, the workers said they were upset about something legally they could do nothing about — the health care benefits of Entergy Nuclear retirees from Vermont Yankee.

Workers said that they were the lowest-paid workers of the five nuclear power plants owned by Entergy Nuclear in the Northeast, between \$3 and \$9 an hour less than their unionized Entergy counterparts.

Union business manager George Clain didn't return repeated telephone calls.

Sheehan said preparations were made to have NRC staff on hand to oversee Entergy's substitute staff if there was a strike. The company by law had to have a contingency plan to run the reactor even without its unionized licensed control room operators, and other key staff.

The union's Web site said that the union had made gains in travel pay, wages and training hours, but was silent about health care insurance.

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