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Pilgrim, union sign 4-year pact; lockout ends

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 09, 2012

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Union workers at the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station in Plymouth approved a new four-year contract Sunday, ending a monthlong lockout and three months of bitter negotiations, officials said.

Local 369 of the Utility Worker Union of America voted, 141 to 67, to ratify the contract, which is effective retroactive to May 16, when the previous contract ended, according to Dan Hurley, the union's president. The details of the agreement were not immediately available Sunday afternoon, although Entergy Corp., the Louisiana-based owner of the plant, said that it included guaranteed wage increases, a company-matching 401(k) plan, and other benefits.

Hurley has said previously that much of the discussion leading to the agreement focused on health care and the conditions related to contract work. He said union members have been without medical coverage since

the beginning of July.

The contract dispute led to a company lockout of the 242 union workers that began in early June, when temporary extensions of the previous contract expired. Concerned that the union would strike, the company locked out the workers and brought in replacements to run the plant. Some critics, including union representatives and political leaders in the state, had said the lockout jeopardized safety at the plant.

With the lockout over, union workers will be reintegrated over a two-day period starting Monday to make sure returning employees' qualifications, training, and other site requirements are current and meet all regulatory standards, said Carol Wightman, spokeswoman for Entergy. The company expects all union members to return to work by Wednesday, she said.

The resolution came two weeks after union members voted, 137 to 89, to reject a previous agreement because they said it included unfair cuts to pay and health care benefits. On Friday, union representatives and company officials formed the current agreement, which was overseen by a federal mediator.

"Entergy began negotiations with demands for major concessions on health care, retirement, salary, and staffing, and we fought hard to emerge with important protections for the hard-working men and women who safely run Pilgrim Nuclear Power Plant on a daily basis and make the plant extremely profitable for management," Hurley said in a written statement. "Now is the time for us to move forward and our workers are looking forward to returning to their jobs this week."

Entergy said that the agreement "represents a substantial commitment to employees in the form of guaranteed wage increases, a comprehensive benefits package including premium health care plan options, a company-matching 401(k) savings program, a defined benefits pension plan, and a union incentive plan."

"The new contract, which came to fruition as a result of a lot of hard work on both sides, reflects our commitment to our employees, is acceptable to our union workers, and preserves union interests," the statement quoted Robert Smith, vice president for the Pilgrim site, as saying.

"We look forward to our employees returning to work, which has been our goal throughout this process."

Entergy has faced criticism over the lockout from officials who said it reduced the safety of the plant and surrounding communities.

US Senator John Kerry, a Massachusetts Democrat, said last month that he worried “whether shortcuts or understaffing are shortchanging [local residents’] expectations for the highest level of safety.” State Treasurer Steven Grossman also urged the company to end the lockout.

On Sunday, Grossman said that he was happy to see that an agreement had been reached but that he remained dismayed that Entergy had implemented a lockout, calling it a “slap in the face” to union workers.

“It was absolutely unnecessary,” he said. “A lot more pain was inflicted on the men and women of that plant than needed to be.”

In May, one month before the facility’s original 40-year license was to expire, the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission voted to relicense the Pilgrim plant for another 20 years.

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