

Governor Paterson: Ensure Con Ed Workers Get Paid Right

Two thousand cleaners and security officers working for contractors at Con Edison, National Grid, and other public utility companies across the state are looking to Governor Paterson to sign a bill that would help lift their families out of poverty. The bill (A10257/S8379) closes a longstanding loophole that keeps contracted cleaners and security officers at public utilities' sites stuck in poverty. It would add service and security workers at public utilities to the list of those who must be paid the "prevailing wage" or going rate for their services.

Poverty Wages

Despite working at sites of multi-billion dollar companies, these workers are struggling to support their families on wages as low as \$8.00 an hour while keeping our state's key sites clean, safe, and secure. Con Ed executives have stood by and callously watched these workers struggle while they raked in \$868 million in profits last year.

We at the Community Service Society (CSS) know about workers living on poverty wages. A few years ago, CSS published research on the working conditions of low-wage security guards in New York City. The study was entitled "Shortchanging Security: How Poor Training, Low Pay and Lack of Job Protection for Security Guards Undermine Public Safety in New York City."

We found that the median hourly wage for guards in the New York City area was only 55 percent of the median for all workers in the metropolitan area. Few guards received benefits on the job. Most labor without a single day of paid sick leave. Given their economic situation, this meant they have no choice but to come to work sick. The result was a workforce with low morale and high turnover, a dangerous situation for those whose job it is to provide security.

Just as at Con Ed, these workers are part of the state's working poor. They live from pay check to pay check. They usually cannot afford the health care they need.

Low-wage workers are bearing the brunt of the economic downturn. In CSS's latest survey of low-income New Yorkers, "The Unheard Third," we found that multiple hardships were widespread. Nearly 3 in 10 low-income New Yorkers reported falling behind in paying the rent; 27 percent had their hours, wages, or tips reduced; 24 percent could not fill a needed prescription because of the lack of money or insurance; and 23 percent lost their job in the past year.

But this is not just about good will towards workers. This is also about a loophole that has allowed utility companies to pad their pockets while passing on hidden costs to already cash-strapped New York taxpayers. Not surprisingly, many of these workers earning such low wages are forced to rely on public assistance programs to support their families. For example, Danny Mercedes, a father of two, has to rely on food stamps and public health programs to take care of his daughters.

Scare Tactics

Adding insult to injury, Con Ed and other utilities are benefiting from being state-regulated monopolies that helped Con Ed alone bring in \$13 billion in revenue from New York ratepayers last year. That, of course, won't hold Con Ed back from trying to scare New Yorkers into thinking that this bill could somehow raise their rates. Even though it would cost only pennies on the dollar of the millions in profits the company made last year, Con Ed seems bent on spending its time and your money to wage a fight to keep these workers in poverty.

Low wages are a problem forcing one-third of all working New Yorkers just to get by. But for publicly regulated companies that all New Yorkers are forced to pay to keep their lights on, these low-wage jobs are not something we should continue to accept.

Governor Paterson, working New Yorkers are counting on you to stand up to Con Ed and other public utilities and their lobbyists. Two thousand workers and millions of New York taxpayers will thank you for keeping the public utilities from taking advantage of them. New Yorkers who are working full time should not be condemned to live in poverty.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 165 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS's website: www.cssny.org.

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