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Con Edison Workers Take Contract Talks to Streets

By Kenneth C. Crowe
Newsday Labor Writer

The union representing 14,000 Consolidated Edison Co. workers will move into the final two weeks of negotiations for a new contract with a fanfare rarely seen in the New York area — with the goal of focusing corporate and public attention on the talks.

During lunchtime on Tuesday, members of Utility Workers Local 1-2 — joined by allies from the construction unions, striking Eastern Airlines flight attendants and even some striking Pittston coal miners from Virginia — will form a "human billboard" stretching 15 blocks from Con Ed's headquarters in Manhattan to the headquarters of two major insurance companies, Metropolitan Life and New York Life on Park Avenue South. The demonstrators will carry signs saying, "They get the gold, workers get the grief."

The insurance companies have been selected to show the relationship between a utility and its lenders, according to Ray Rogers, the union's professional strategist. He calls the lenders "shadow manage-

ment." Metropolitan Life and New York Life both hold millions of dollars in Con Edison bonds and have directors on Con Ed's board, and vice versa.

The display is intended as a "warning shot" of the mobilization of Local 1-2 in preparation for a showdown, if necessary, with Con Ed, Rogers said. At least 1,500 volunteers will have to turn out to make the effort successful, he said.

"The company has been playing hardball in negotiations" by asking for a number of givebacks, Rogers said. "What we hope to accomplish is to point out to large sectors — of not only the labor movement, but the public — the role that some of these big insurance companies play in the antisocial, antipeople and anti-union behavior."

Con Ed declined comment. "We don't negotiate in the press," said Martin F. Gitten, the utility's spokesman.

Stanley Aronowitz, a sociologist at the City University of New York's Graduate Center, said that Local 1-2's "human billboard" represents both a radical departure

from the routine approach to bargaining by the union and a tactic with a potential for great success since everybody in the city knows what Con Ed is and uses the utility's services.

"Con Ed depends on public goodwill for the expansion of its business and because they always need concessions from the city and the state. They have to be popular," Aronowitz said.

Local 1-2's business manager, Eugene Briody, said that aside from wages and fringe benefits, the union is seeking lifetime monitoring for signs of illness among employees exposed to asbestos and other toxics. He said that underlying that demand are the results of a union-financed program in which 18 of 98 Con Ed workers examined by medical experts at union expense showed signs of asbestosis, a scarring of the lungs.

Local 1-2, which went through a nine-week strike in 1983, will vote Tuesday night on whether to authorize a walkout when the current contract expires on June 24. "My goal is not to have a strike," Briody said.