The Columbus Dispatch

Columbia Gas raised your rates while nickel and diming employees. They are standing up.

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BY EDDIE HALL, President of Utility Workers Union of America AFL-CIO Local G-555

The labor movement has entered a new era across the nation.

Workers from virtually every sector are standing up for their rights — and winning.

The labor movement has not seen this kind of momentum in years, whether it's the Writers Guild of America, Amazon, or Kaiser Healthcare workers emerging victorious from work stoppages, or the United Auto Workers fighting against the Big Three manufacturers to protect workers' rights.

Here in Ohio, utility workers are fighting in that same spirit by launching a statewide organizing campaign for Columbia Gas workers. A majority of workers have signed union cards in two districts already – and we're pushing ahead to sign up Columbia Gas workers across the state.

Ohio gas industry workers are tired of being taken advantage of by Columbia Gas and being victimized by a corporation that prioritizes profits over people.

Despite record inflation and families struggling to make ends meet, Columbia Gas raised rates on 1.4 million customers across Ohio this year.

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The rate hikes were opposed by consumer advocates, but a settlement was struck which resulted in a revenue increase of more than $68 million for Columbia this year, thanks to monthly rate hikes placed on consumers.

Meanwhile, Lloyd Yates, CEO of NiSource, the parent company of Columbia Gas, took in more than $7 million in compensation in 2022.

In addition, according to the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy (ACEEE), Columbia Gas was permitted to scale back energy efficiency programs which help the most vulnerable Ohioans pay their energy bills.

Consumers won't be happy either.

Columbia's greed will cost Ohio families more this winter to heat and power their homes and businesses.

Meanwhile the company is willfully obstructing good faith attempts by workers to organize. Robert Kelter, Senior Attorney at The Environmental Law and Policy Center, said he was "disappointed" in the company. "Raising the fixed customer charge … guarantees utility profits at the expense of consumers," Kelter says. "It particularly hurts low-income customers who typically use less gas. This decision will cause many customers to face increased difficulties paying their bills."

Columbia's corporate greed is hurting working families in Ohio.

The company is taking harmful, profit-maximizing steps while nickel and diming workers on issues like sick leave for example. The company is demanding more of frontline workers while at the same time failing to meet workers halfway on basic issues like scheduling and training. At the same time, they're intruding on employee's freedom and privacy, proposing using new technology to spy on employees throughout their shifts.

That's why Utility Workers Union of America organizers are working with Columbia employees and their families to achieve what other union workers have been able to do across the country: negotiate agreements that give them fairness, dignity and respect in their lives.

The UWUA has a track record of fighting for top wages, the best health care, a pathway toward retirement, and safe job sites and now they are fighting for Ohio workers.

The same issues plaguing Ohio utility workers are why 160 workers in Georgia and Kentucky recently voted to join the UWUA, and why many Columbia Gas workers here in Ohio already have voiced their support for unionization.

Seventy workers at Liberty Utility in Columbus and Gainesville, Georgia, and 90 at Delta Natural Gas Company in Kentucky have joined the UWUA. In Georgia, the UWUA now represents Liberty employees in the field and in call centers. The vote occurred after Liberty employees contacted the UWUA with concerns about workplace safety, scheduling, low wages, and other benefit-related issues.

Ohio workers deserve competent representation so they too can have a voice at the table to negotiate the wages and benefits they deserve.

Every day we are seeing labor unions win across America.

The country is waking up to the truth that joining a union is the shortest route to the middle class. Columbia Gas workers deserve respect on the job, family-sustaining benefits, and opportunities for a brighter future. It's time for Columbia Gas to stop fear mongering, come to the table, and recognize its employees as proud members of the UWUA.

Eddie Hall is president of Utility Workers Union of America AFL-CIO Local G-555, a union of gas and electrical utility workers.

Learn more at:
ColumbiaWorkersUnite.org
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