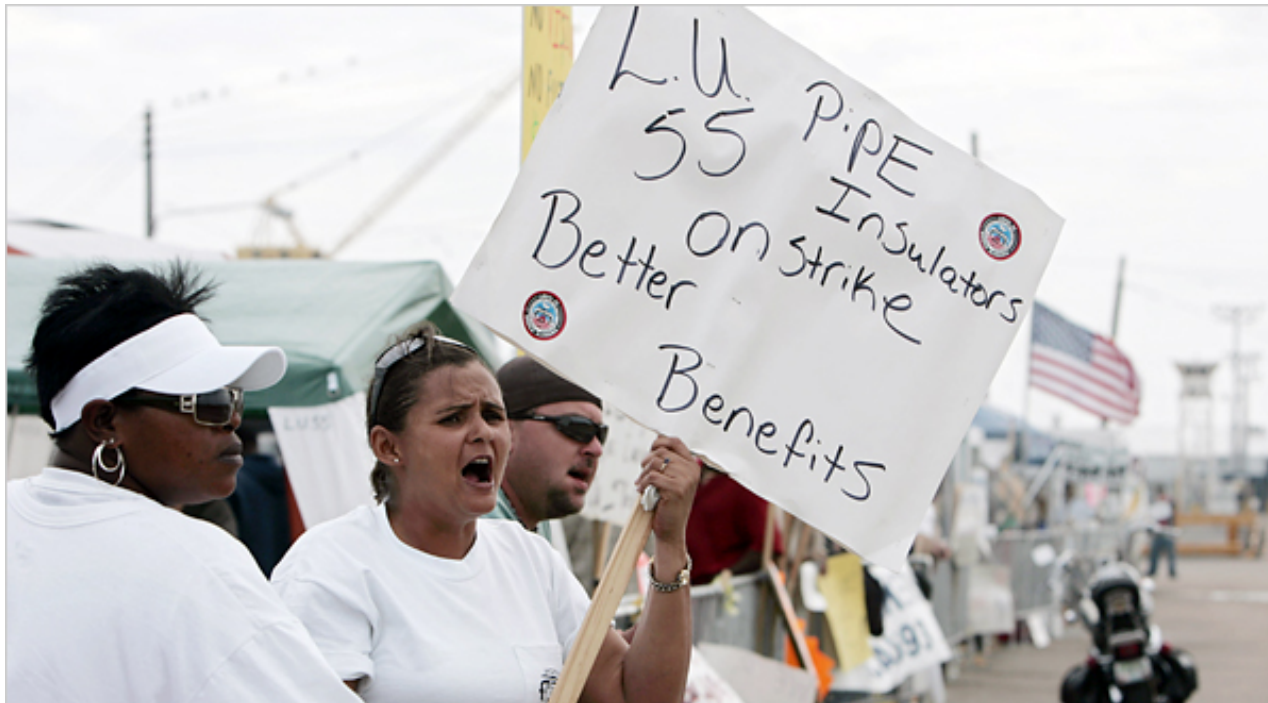


Strike at Big Shipyard Is Yet Another Effect of Katrina



Lee Celano for The New York Times

D. J. Jones, a shipyard worker on the picket line in Pascagoula, Miss., shouted Monday at a passing car. Nearly 7,000 workers at the Ingalls shipyard, owned by Northrop Grumman, walked off the job last week.

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By [ADAM NOSSITER](#)

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PASCAGOULA, Miss., March 12 — The long arm of Hurricane Katrina has pushed thousands off the job and on strike at one of the nation's biggest shipyards here, workers and union officials say.

On Thursday, nearly 7,000 workers went on strike at the Ingalls shipyard, owned by Northrop Grumman, which builds ships for the Navy. On the picket line Monday, strikers said they were demanding better wages and benefits to make up for sharp post-Katrina increases in the price of everything from milk to gas to rent, which they said are bringing family finances to the breaking point.

The walkout here is believed to be the first major strike related to Hurricane Katrina, which continues to disrupt many aspects of life up and down the Gulf Coast. Few places were as hard-hit as this small industrial town, where the water crept halfway up downtown and the beachfront was wiped out, and workers spoke Monday of losing homes, cars and a way of life to the storm.

They left the shipyard, which has supported this region for decades, after rejecting a modest increase in the \$18.32 an hour many now make. Workers here said the wage rise would be wiped out by a steep increase in health insurance premiums, and would be inadequate to counter the storm's lingering fallout.

They earn some of the highest wages in the area, at Mississippi's largest employer. But many workers said they were still struggling, speaking of payday loans from the company credit union just to buy gasoline. They said the company's offer of a \$2.50-per-hour raise over three years was not good enough, with local rents and house prices having doubled, in some cases, and a \$2.59 gallon of milk now costing \$4.19. Throw in a proposed \$50-per-month health premium increase, and the raise disappears, they said.

"Folks have already been through a hard time with Katrina," said Willie Hammond, a forklift driver and father of three. "They left their houses to get this company up and running, and this is how they show their appreciation? It was an insult to the employees, that little offer they made us."

Bill George, a pipe welder, said prices in the area had quadrupled since the storm. "Half the people here are living in trailers," he said.

Natasha Smith, a painter, said her rent had risen to \$801 a month, from \$669. "We're single parents, and we can't make it on what they're paying us," she said.

A company spokesman said Monday that there were no plans for negotiations. In a statement, Northrop Grumman said its offer was "fair and competitive," and noted that other company plants in the region had accepted it. The company added: "It was our desire that this labor agreement address the financial challenges of Katrina, and we believe the proposed contract did just that." Workers sharply disputed that contention, however.

"Katrina took everything, and now they're trying to take the main thing, our dignity," said Shirley Hayes, who oversees shipments on the assembly line. "They're just playing us cheap," she said.

John Reed, an electrician, said, "We're living out here paycheck to paycheck, and we're tired of it."

Like other strikers, Mr. Reed was standing near the dusty median of the plant's long entrance road, which was picket central on Monday. The strikers had set up tents and barbecue grills in the mild spring weather, and the blues blared from giant speakers. The shipyard's major projects — a giant destroyer and several transport ships — loomed in the distance on the Mississippi Sound, and seagulls whirled overhead.

The shipyard has been a mainstay in Pascagoula since before World War II. Dozens of businesses here depend on its paychecks, and at quitting time the local roads are clogged.

The destroyer Cole was repaired here after the terrorist attack on its hull, and over the years the yard has turned out cruisers, destroyers, submarines and ammunition ships.

Workers have not struck the plant since 1999, and local officials speak fearfully about the effects of a prolonged strike. Still, there appeared to be considerable support for the workers in town — grocery stores have donated ice, water and hot dogs.

With the company not budging, the strikers were vowing to settle in for the long haul. “If we can survive Katrina, we can survive this,” Mr. Reed said.

Indeed, the workers here displayed a remarkable nonchalance about the hardships ahead. Bobby Hinger, the steward of the carpenters’ shop, stayed at the plant during the storm, water up to his neck. Then, he said: “They gave us a steak dinner and a jacket that don’t fit us, and they said, ‘See ya.’ This isn’t about being greedy. It’s about being paid what we’re worth.”

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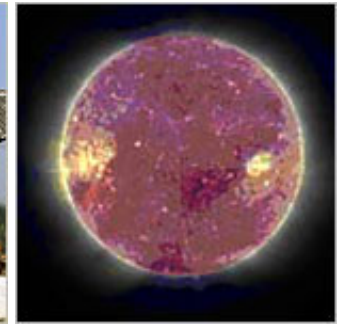
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