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'Ellensburg 6' make a stand

The linemen, public employees, take their cause to the public.

A struggle for a fair union contract for six electric linemen at the City of Ellensburg, Washington has galvanized the town of 21,000 and earned solidarity from fellow union members hundreds of miles away.

Members of IBEW Local 77 who maintain the city's municipal electric utility have been ne-

gotiating since August 2020 over a new contract. Under the agreement that expired Dec. 31, 2020, journeyman linemen make \$47.65 an hour, roughly \$2 less than their counterparts in neighboring jurisdictions. They also have fewer retiree benefits.

Journeyman lineman Bryan Ring says that lower-than-standard pay is contributing to high turnover. Since he arrived in Ellensburg in 2016, nine journeymen have left. The six remaining workers—three journeymen, two apprentices, and a meterman—are responsible for a network of over 10,000 elec-

tric hookups in a six-square-mile Central Washington service area half an hour north of Yakima.

Crew members wanted to catch up in the next contract, but instead would fall behind under the City's offer of 1% pay increase over the next three years. The crew voted to reject that in December.

Now they're appealing to the public for support, and getting it. Yard signs are popping up all over town. Posters are going up in business windows. A campaign Facebook page has 828 followers. And members of the

public are turning up at meetings of the Ellensburg City Council. Streamed on YouTube, the meetings normally attract a few dozen views. The Feb. 16 meeting got 1,030 views, equal to a twentieth of the population of Ellensburg. A four-hour March 5 picket outside city hall drew residents and fellow IBEW members from as far as Coeur d'Alene and Seattle.

"It's really made us feel like the community supports us," Ring said. "All of us belong to this community. And all we are going after are fair wages and benefits." —DM

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