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## **BAKER GETTING MORE VOCAL OVER NATIONAL GRID LOCKOUT**

By Chris Triunfo

STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

BOSTON, OCT. 10, 2018....Locked out steelworkers aimed their bullhorns and pointed their picket signs up at the Prudential Center Wednesday, calling for the resignation of National Grid Massachusetts President Marcy Reed from the board of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts.

Missing from their signs and chants were Gov. Charlie Baker's name. In the past, the unionized steelworkers have been seen calling the governor out for his alleged inaction or simply asking for his help.

When Baker toured a mock-up of a new Red Line car in August, he was flanked by locked out workers who held signs high above the crowd. On Sept. 2, union presidents Joe Kirylo and John Buonopane published an editorial in The Metrowest Daily News imploring readers to "...please pick up your phone, or get on email and ask Gov. Charlie Baker to tell National Grid to put public safety first and stop punishing the families of unionized gas workers."

During the first gubernatorial debate on Tuesday, Baker and his opponent Jay Gonzalez addressed the lockout. WBZ moderator Joe Keller started by asking the governor when, if ever, it is appropriate for an elected official to intervene in a private sector labor dispute.

Baker answered by emphasizing his recent involvement in the negotiations.

"We've spent a fair amount of time over the past four or five weeks with the steelworkers and National Grid, and we have put them in the same room to see if we can mediate their differences and see if they can hammer out an agreement," Baker said during the televised debate. "I'd love to be able to say that we've been successful in doing that, but we haven't been able to get them to agree yet."

Gonzalez immediately fired back by mentioning the presence of locked out workers just outside the WBZ studio in Allston.

"This is definitely a case where the governor should have stepped in earlier," Gonzalez said. "A lot of these National Grid steelworkers were out in front of [the] studio today cheering me on as I came in because I've stood with them. I went with them to the Department of Public Utilities (DPU)."

According to the governor's office, Baker met with union leaders for the first time on Sept. 9. On Sept. 11, Attorney General Maura Healey asked the DPU, which regulates gas work, to conduct a public investigation of safety issues during the lockout, a request she says the DPU rejected.

The governor's involvement came just before the Columbia Gas explosions that rocked three Merrimack Valley communities and well before the state issued a moratorium on all National Grid work following an overpressurization incident on Monday in Woburn, which led to the loss of service in 300 homes.

Baker said that while Gonzalez may have gone to the DPU with the workers, it was his administration that sent them there in the first place.

"We were the ones who met with them and sent them down to the DPU and eventually issued an order that was specific to the issues and concerns that have been raised by the steelworkers," Baker said. "We'll continue to pursue those issues as they come available and we've made quite clear to them that our door is open to meet with them whenever they want to raise issues, especially if they relate to safety."

The locked out workers made their way around the block from the Prudential Center Wednesday and met with striking hotel workers at the Sheraton Boston Hotel, each group expressing its support for the other.

At the end of the protest, the president of USW 12012, John Buonopane, said the day's events were not about any elected officials, just about Marcy Reed.

"We want Marcy Reed to get this message, that's what matters today. That's why we're here," Buonopane said.

In a statement to the News Service, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts said "Marcy Reed has served on our Board since 2016 and brings the important voice of employers to our Board discussions."

In a separate statement, National Grid of Massachusetts said that they "remain committed to negotiating for a fair agreement with the Steelworkers that balances the needs of our employees and our customers and gets our union employees back to work as soon as possible. To accomplish that, we need to have serious, productive conversations about reaching an agreement."

Gov. Baker said that he hopes his actions will pressure National Grid to act.

"I think it's really important that those guys and gals get back to work," Baker said. "I think one of the ways we get them back to work is by demonstrating to National Grid that they're not going to be able to do any more work outside their statutory obligations until they put them back to work."

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