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# Guards Go on Strike at Nuclear Weapons Plant

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More than 500 security guards at the nation's only nuclear weapons assembly plant walked off the job just after midnight yesterday to protest what they said is a steep deterioration in job and retirement security since the government changed fitness standards for weapons-plant guards in response to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The contractor at the plant, BWXT Pantex in Carson County, Tex., replaced the striking guards with a contingency force that it says will secure the plant's weapons, nuclear materials and explosives as long as necessary. The issue is not confined to Pantex because guard union leaders at other weapons plants also are raising concerns about the new security requirements, which they say will force many older guards out of their jobs.

Congressional Democrats criticized the Energy Department for not acting to resolve the guards' concerns in time to avert a strike.

"This employment instability not only raises the potential for significant costs to the American taxpayer, but also raises serious nuclear security concerns," said Rep. Bart Stupak (D-Mich.), who chairs the oversight subcommittee of the Energy and Commerce Committee.

Energy Department officials said there is no cause for security concerns at Pantex or at other weapons plants that have sent security guards to participate in the contingent force.

"Security and safety are paramount at Pantex, and they will not be compromised regardless of any circumstances," said Bryan Wilkes, spokesman for the Energy Department's National Nuclear Security Administration. "Both safety and security will continue to be consistent with the conditions that existed prior to the guard work stoppage."

The Pantex plant, which covers 16,000 acres outside Amarillo, assembles, refurbishes and dismantles the country's nuclear weapons. The Energy Department, which owns nuclear weapons plants, and BWXT, which operates and secures the Pantex site, have been preparing for several weeks for the strike, which grew from serious differences over how to implement stiffer fitness requirements designed to protect against acts of terrorism.

Pantex is among the first few Energy Department facilities to implement the more stringent security standards, formulated in 2005. The standards require a shift from a defensive guard force to what one agency document describes as "a combat-effective protective force designed to defeat a well-armed and dedicated terrorist adversary."

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The shift requires more guards to be highly skilled shooters and to meet offensive, as opposed to defensive, fitness standards, which include running a mile in 8 1/2 minutes and a 40-yard dash in 8 seconds. They also must wear bulletproof vests and carry rifles throughout their 12-hour shifts, which together weigh about 40 pounds, according to Pantex Guards Union President Robert Lynch, who said this poses a problem for middle-aged guards.

Guards unable to meet the requirements face the prospect of losing their jobs and health insurance, according to Lynch. The guards work for the contractor, not for the Energy Department, but must meet the department's security standards.

Jud Simmons, a spokesman for BWXT Pantex, said the company thought it had presented "a fair and reasonable labor agreement that recognizes [the security guards'] important contributions to national security." He declined to give details of the company's offer.

Lynch said the union is not questioning the need for higher security but wants the contractor and the department to provide guards a career path similar to that of federal law enforcement officers who can move into less physically demanding positions as they age. He said many older guards cannot meet the fitness standards and are taking janitorial jobs inside the Pantex plant, for much lower pay, to keep their medical coverage.

The guards make more than \$20 an hour, and because they work extensive overtime, Pantex said they earn an average of \$72,000 yearly.

Glenn Podonsky, the Energy Department's chief of health, safety and security, wrote in February that the department recognized that the new security policies could hinder the guards' career paths and that their pensions were not comparable to their federal counterparts'. In a letter to Mike Stumbo, president of the National Council of Security Police, Podonsky said he and others in the department would "explore courses of action to address longevity and retirement options."

A spokeswoman for Podonsky did not respond to a reporter's queries on Friday and yesterday, asking what had been explored.

Simmons of BWXT Pantex said the company has not set a timetable for resuming negotiations. The guards have called for a federal mediator to help expedite talks. A mediator worked through the weekend but left for a 14-day cooling-off period after the strike vote.

"Fourteen days is okay for general industry, but we're not protecting the Wal-Mart parking lot here. We're protecting nuclear weapons," Stumbo said.

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