

Bill aims to keep benefits for striking utility workers

Rep. David Nangle, D-Lowell, says his legislation won't help striking NStar workers, but may help others in the future.

BY CYNDI ROY

STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

BOSTON — Prompted by NStar's decision last week to cancel health benefits for nearly 1,900 striking union employees, a state lawmaker has filed legislation to prevent other companies from revoking coverage if their employees hit the picket lines.

Rep. David Nangle, D-Lowell, has introduced a bill to prohibit utility companies from denying health-care benefits to workers due to a work stoppage. His bill was admitted in both branches today and referred to the Joint Committee on Labor and Workforce Development for review.

When two thirds of its employees stopped working May 16, NStar immediately canceled medical, dental, life insurance and dependent care benefits through Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Massachusetts for those striking employees.

Nangle said he recognizes his bill will probably not restore benefits for those workers, but hopes it will prevent future benefit losses for employees at other utility companies.

"If there is a work stoppage down the road, maybe it will prevent the company from taking the health-care benefits so abruptly and quickly," he said. "With NStar, the union members didn't even know they were losing their coverage."

But NStar officials say no work, no benefits.

"The benefit cost is the same as wages," NStar spokeswoman Caroline Allen said. "Every American understands if you don't work, you don't get paid. We don't think it's appropriate to ask our customers to pay wages and benefits for employees who are choosing not to work."

Under the federal COBRA law, striking workers can keep health insurance for up to 60 days as long as they pay the full premium, Allen said. Before the strike, NStar union employees paid 15 percent of their health care costs, with the company picking up the remainder. Now they have to pay 100 percent.

Nangle, a union employee for

11 years before entering the Legislature, said cutting health benefits makes it difficult for families of striking workers.

"Granted, yeah, they're not working; however, they're striking for various reasons," he said. "When they negotiated their contracts, they gave something up to obtain the coverage they were looking for. We have enough individuals in the Commonwealth without health insurance."

Revoking health-care benefits is not unusual, though companies have usually waited several weeks before taking action, Nangle said. Striking workers at Raytheon Co. lost company-covered health care a month into strikes in 2000, as did workers at New England Telephone Co. in 1989.

NStar and union leaders were back at the bargaining table Monday afternoon with a federal mediator who the sides hope can draw up a compromise over disputes around the proposed elimination of medical and vision benefits for retirees, forced overtime, pension benefit cuts, scheduling rules, and company staffing.