

#DemocratizeComEd

For the first time in 30 years, Commonwealth Edison's (ComEd) contract with Chicago is up for renewal. This has provided a prime opportunity for the people to take control of our energy distribution and create a municipal utility. We know that to ensure an energy-secure future that accounts for increasing climate change effects, Chicago needs a democratically controlled municipal utility.

History

In 2019, as ComEd's contract began to come to an end, Chicago Democratic Socialists of America (CDSA) voted to establish our #DemocratizeComEd campaign as a priority campaign for our chapter. We knew that to achieve a municipal utility in Chicago, it wouldn't happen on its own. Under this campaign, CDSA formed a Democratize ComEd Coalition with 33rd Ward Working Families, Sunrise Movement Chicago, Food & Water Watch, UIC-GEO Local 6297, and Edgewater Environmental Coalition. Our coalition believes that Chicago cannot rely on privatized energy companies to address climate change and provide equitable energy distribution to our communities.

There's a whole host of reasons why municipalization of our utilities is vital. For one, we know that decarbonization cannot wait. We saw this past year how unprecedented weather events caused by climate change left people throughout Texas and much of the central US without power. This led to catastrophic effects, including many deaths. This cannot continue to happen. We can't face climate change by relying on the same profit-driven corporations that caused these problems.

Additionally, ComEd has a long history of corruption and scandal, with the most recent bribery scheme including former Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan. ComEd has been accused of using shadow lobbying and PACs to buy influence over Chicago and Illinois legislators.



ComEd was able to do this as they've made over \$200 million in profits from Chicagoans.

Allowing ComEd to continue operating in Chicago will not address the failings of our energy system. We know that the creation of a municipal utility is the only way forward. But while a democratically controlled utility is the ultimate demand, DemComEd and our coalition partners have developed a more extensive list of demands.

1. Establish a democratically elected utility board
2. Complete decarbonization of our electric supply by 2030
3. Institute progressive electric rates
4. Expand low-income assistance
5. Labor solidarity



Democratically elected utility board

We deserve more transparency and accountability concerning our utilities. A democratically elected utility board will ensure that they answer to the people. Chicagoans will also be able to decide where our money goes. We can vote to redirect profits back into our communities.



Decarbonization by 2030

ComEd has been provided ample time to begin decarbonization under previous energy legislation, such as the Future Energy Jobs Act. However, ComEd used this bill as a way to double-dip and extract profits from the public. We know that the time to act towards climate change mitigation is now. We're demanding that Chicago completely decarbonize its energy supply by 2030 by investments in renewable energy, energy storage, and energy efficiency efforts.



Progressive rates structure

A recent study by Citizens' Utility Board found that low-income households in the South and West sides end up subsidizing wealthier households across Chicago. These wealthier households use more electricity during peak times, driving electricity costs up for everyone. This has created an unfair cost burden placed on our most vulnerable communities. We are demanding progressive rate structures that will be tied to electricity usage, thereby creating a more equitable energy bill for all.



Expanded low-income assistance

Building on our previous demand, DemComEd wants an expanded low-income assistance program. After rent, utilities are often the second-largest household expense, especially for many residents throughout Chicago. We believe that no one should have to choose between paying for groceries or their energy bill. Expanded assistance for low-income households will lift an unfair financial burden.



Labor solidarity

In the transition from ComEd to a democratized utility, we want to ensure that our workers are taken care of. To that end, we demand that workers are rehired into parallel positions within the new utility. Additionally, we want to honor the existing union contract with IBEW and extend union protections to any new workers.

Our work so far

Last year, DemComEd was able to pressure the city to commission a feasibility study to municipalize. To conduct this study, the city hired NewGen Strategies & Solutions. With support from Alderman Daniel La Spata, we were then able to get the Committee for Environmental Protection & Energy to hold a hearing on this study.

This feasibility study claimed that Chicago was not in a financially secure place to municipalize. Furthermore, they determined that the average household would see a \$6 increase in their monthly energy bills. However, analysts have serious misgivings concerning this study. For one, this study relied only on numbers provided by ComEd, rather than an independent engineering assessment. The study also didn't consider the social benefits of municipalization. We know that ComEd has also continually failed to meet renewable standards and this study just assumed they would meet any future goals.

Along with getting this feasibility study commissioned, we've also been able to change the conversation in Chicago. Mayor Lightfoot recently issued a letter to ComEd which outlined reforms she wanted to see in the new franchise agreement — with many of the reforms taken from our own demands. We've also received significant media coverage, and we continue to build relationships around the city and strengthen our coalition.

Next steps

Overall, DemComEd is continuing to organize and build our coalition. We've also developed two paths forward as we continue this campaign. The first, and most obvious, is to win municipalization now. This may not be possible yet, but we are building support among our alders in hopes of getting the required 26 votes in City Council. Our second path is by winning core demands in a new franchise agreement. This agreement would include community oversight, equity provisions, climate commitments, and more favorable municipalization language.

We have seen during this pandemic the profound importance energy security has on our lives. It is vital that no one loses power and goes without energy. We know that a municipal utility works, and we want to see it come to fruition in Chicago. We want our utilities run by the people, for the people.

