

US telephone workers union ends strike against Bell Atlantic

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The Communication Workers of America (CWA) abruptly ended a 58-hour walkout by 73,000 workers in 13 eastern states and Washington, DC, announcing that it had reached a tentative agreement with Bell Atlantic Tuesday morning. By midday the CWA had pulled down its picket lines and instructed its members to report to work on their next scheduled shift. Workers were given no details of the agreement but were told they would have a chance to ratify the deal over the next 30 days.

The walkout that had affected service from Maine to Virginia began Sunday. Rank and file workers had welcomed an opportunity to wage a fight against Bell Atlantic, the US's largest regional phone company. Last year the company merged with NYNEX, the regional phone company in New York, and two weeks ago it announced that it will take part in a \$52 billion merger with GTE Corporation, creating the largest telecommunications company in the world.

Since the 1990s Bell Atlantic and NYNEX have eliminated 15,000 jobs. As the demand for Internet access and high-speed lines for other data transmissions has increased, the two companies have imposed forced overtime and relied more heavily on part-time and temporary work, while shifting production from unionized areas to their nonunion subsidiaries.

Typical of the militancy among workers were the comments of strikers in New York, one of the centers of the struggle. At a midtown Manhattan rally Monday, John Daly, a technician, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, 'The biggest issue in the strike is Bell Atlantic's farming out of work to nonunion subsidies. We will not stand for that. They already have a center set up in Virginia using low wage workers. If we allow them to do that, it's the beginning of the end for us, and for the union.'

Another temporary technician whom Bell Atlantic has refused to promote into a permanent position said, 'We are the victims of the global competition of these giants. If they can keep shifting to these nonunion operations, they will surely go to Mexico or the Philippines to find even cheaper labor. That's what the GM workers were striking about, and that's what were fighting.'

'The union is partnering with the company. This is the language that they use. I call it sleeping with the enemy. Did you see the rally that the construction workers held just recently? That gives you an idea of the kind of struggle that it will take to settle things with the corporations.'

On Monday four strikers in New York City were charged for alleged picket line violence. In Poughkeepsie in upstate New York, eight others were charged with disorderly conduct after being accused of blocking trucks from exiting a Bell Atlantic facility.

The agreement signed by the CWA is in line with Bell Atlantic's drive to increase productivity and carry through further cost-cutting measures. Wall Street welcomed the settlement by bidding up Bell Atlantic's share values, despite the sell-off of many stocks Tuesday.

In announcing the deal, Donald Sacco, Bell Atlantic's executive vice president of human resources, said the agreement 'recognizes new competitive realities.' He boasted about the establishment of a new system of profit-sharing that will give CWA members cash awards if they reach productivity goals set jointly by management and the union. 'Since the start of the new Bell Atlantic,' he said, 'we have recognized the need to forge stronger partnerships with our unions to work together to expand our business in high-technology areas.'

The new contract, which is for two years, instead of the customary three, provides pay increases of 3.8 percent the first year and 4.0 percent the following. It also raises pension benefits by up to 20 percent.

The deal does little to address workers' concerns about forced overtime and increased work loads. For seven months of the year, the company will be allowed to order up to 10 hours of overtime in a week, while for five months--the identified vacation period--the cap will be 15 hours.

In announcing the agreement, however, CWA President Morton Bahr said the union had achieved an 'historic breakthrough.' He referred to Bell Atlantic's agreement to transfer customer account work, currently done at a nonunion 'Bell Atlantic Plus' center in Hampton, Virginia to CWA-represented offices. Moreover, Bahr said, the company agreed to recognize the union at any present or future non-union work units, with the exception of Bell Atlantic Mobile (the cellular phone service), when a majority of workers sign cards asking for union representation.

This stipulation is chiefly aimed at guaranteeing the future income of the union bureaucracy, rather than improving workers' conditions. In the 1992 and 1996 contracts, the CWA agreed to allow each of the regional phone companies and AT & T to set up separate construction and installation units. In exchange for union recognition, the CWA allowed the companies to pay lower wages and benefits. At Bell Atlantic's BACCSI unit, new hires are paid \$8.50 an hour and must work several years before they reach top pay level which is still 40 percent lower than workers at the parent company receive. Since then, the company has expanded its BACCSI operations, including the work to launch its new high-speed Internet access service known as ADSL.

The union leadership's major concern was the maintenance of its franchise in the fast-growing high-technology sectors of Bell Atlantic's operations. Thus the strike was called, not to fight for the interests of CWA members, but to press the demands of the union officialdom. In exchange for access to millions in dues income, the CWA has agreed to maintain the low-pay and temporary status of thousands of employees.

The two-and-a-half day strike ended just as it begun. Prior to the walkout on Sunday, telephone workers had been kept in the dark about the negotiations. The CWA

had not organized any local meetings for weeks, if not months. Then on Sunday morning workers were told they were on strike and engaged in a decisive struggle against one of America's most profitable corporations. Fifty-eight hours later the CWA leadership called off the strike and ordered their members back to work before they ever learned what was in the agreement.

In calling the strike, CWA officials were undoubtedly concerned that if they ordered members to continue to work without a contract, as they had done in the two previous contract cycles, rank and file workers might have walked out anyway. On Tuesday workers at Southern New England Telecommunications Corp. nearly walked off the job in opposition to the tentative agreement struck by the union and management Friday.

See Also:

73,000 US telephone workers strike Bell Atlantic
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