

73,000 US telephone workers strike Bell Atlantic

Our reporter
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Chanting 'No contract no work,' 73,000 workers in 13 states manned picket lines Monday morning on the first business day of a strike by members of the Communication Workers of America (CWA) against Bell Atlantic.

The walkout began at 12:01 am Sunday and affected phone repair, operator assistance and installation service along the eastern seaboard. The company is using managers working around the clock to maintain phone service. Bell Atlantic spokesmen denounced the strike as unnecessary, claiming that it had offered the CWA a no-layoff pledge to address concerns about its practice of farming work out to nonunion subsidiaries.

The CWA is demanding greater access to jobs at Bell Atlantic's fast-growing wireless, internet, long distance and data service operations. These subsidiaries employ lower-paid and, in many cases, temporary workers to do the work traditionally carried out by union members. The CWA wants to unionize these workers.

In addition, workers are demanding a reduction in forced overtime, greater freedom in choosing vacations and an end to the harassment of workers who are off work because of disabling injuries. Negotiators for the two sides continued talks in New York and Washington Monday but did not reach an agreement.

The CWA reached an agreement with another phone company, BellSouth, shortly before Sunday's deadline, averting a strike by an additional 48,000 workers in the southern states. The settlement reportedly includes limitations on overtime and gives the CWA a new provision for expedited union representation elections. Another 36,000 workers face an August 15 contract expiration at US West Inc.

Last year Bell Atlantic and NYNEX merged, becoming the largest of the regional telephone companies. Bell Atlantic now provides telephone service from Maine to Virginia, as well as Washington DC. It has 27 million

customers with over 40 million access lines. Bell Atlantic announced two weeks ago plans to merge with GTE in a stock swap valued at \$52 billion, making it the largest telecommunication company in the world.

The industry has gone through more than two decades of downsizing as a result of government deregulation, multi-billion dollar mergers and swift advances in technology. More than 200,000 jobs, or one of every four in the industry, has been eliminated since 1984.

This process has continued under the impetus of the 1996 Telecommunications Reform Act, which was designed to make the American telecommunication giants more globally competitive and better able to enter new international markets. CWA President Morton Bahr has worked closely with the Clinton administration and the phone companies toward this end.

The last strike against the two companies was in 1989, when workers at Bell Atlantic struck for three weeks and workers at NYNEX were on the picket line for 17 weeks. In the following two rounds of negotiations the union allowed its members to work without a contract, and then signed an agreement which did little to stop outsourcing and the erosion of working conditions.

Bell Atlantic currently has 143,000 employees, of which 73,000 are in the CWA. Another 25,000 are in the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). In New England the IBEW leadership agreed to have its members continue working without a contract. In New Jersey and Pennsylvania, IBEW workers have two years left on their five-year contract and have been told by the union leadership to continue working. Despite this, many individual IBEW members chose not to report to work. They reportedly received phone calls at home from Bell Atlantic threatening them with discipline.

While all 73,000 workers work for Bell Atlantic, the CWA is bargaining two separate contracts, one covering workers in Bell Atlantic-North, the former NYNEX

territories, and one covering workers in Bell Atlantic-South. A spokesperson for the CWA said it was possible for the union to reach a contract and call off the strike at one location before the other.

Management at the former NYNEX as well as Bell Atlantic have shifted much of their work to subsidiaries. All wireless communications have been given over to Bell Atlantic mobile. A separate company is handling the fast growing internet services. Last year the company opened a massive call center in Virginia, staffed 24 hours-a-day, where it hopes to use 2,000 part-time and temporary nonunion workers. The call center has increasingly taken accounts that used to be handled by service representatives.

During 1995-96 bargaining, the CWA agreed to allow Bell Atlantic to operate an outside construction subsidiary, known as BACCSI, for installation work. In exchange for union recognition for most of BACCSI workers, the CWA agreed that these workers would be paid less than 60 percent of the wages of workers doing similar work for the parent company. Since then, the company has expanded its BACCSI operations, including the work to launch its new high-speed internet access service known as ADSL.

'It makes us sick to hang up from the phone after taking an order for 100 new lines and to know that the order is going to be farmed out to a non-union firm to do the installation,' said Maryann Clafshenkel, a consultant with more than 24 years who was picketing in front of Bell Atlantic offices in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Other workers also expressed outrage over the outsourcing of jobs. Jay DeArman, a switching equipment tech in Pittsburgh, explained, 'BACCSI is doing the outside work, installing telephone lines. You don't realize how much of their work has to be re-worked by us. The company does not care about the quality of service as long as they are making profits.'

The last few years have seen an explosive growth in the demand for new services, both additional access lines and high-speed data lines for internet and other services. This has placed an added strain on workers. Rather than hire additional employees, Bell Atlantic has compelled workers to labor increasing amounts of overtime. In many centers employees work ten, fifteen or twenty hours a week of overtime.

Jim Fenney, a customer service agent with nine years at Bell Atlantic, explained, 'I was working at our center when my mother became sick. At that time we were working 15 hours a week mandatory overtime. It is very

hard to care for your dying mother when you are being forced to do that much overtime.'

Like many other workers on the picket line he expressed frustration with management. 'I just came to this department about a month ago. Three days after I got this job a new third level supervisor was put in who announced that she wanted to close our department and move it out of state. She brought in another manager who, in the words of one of my supervisors, was hired to 'inflict pain.' We try and do the best job we can, but it is hard coming to work every day and having to fight against your supervisor just to do a job right.'

Another major complaint of strikers is Bell Atlantic's use of a contracting firm to handle benefits for workers on sick leave. This company, which goes by the initials CORE, is notorious for forcing convalescing employees back to work before they or their doctor say they are ready.

Dianne Mercado, a service representative with 11 years, explained, 'I have eleven pages of notes from phone calls over two months trying to ensure that I get paid for some time off. When you send in the necessary paper work it gets lost or it is not entered into the system. The people you talk to are not knowledgeable of the situation. I had my doctor call them several times, and each time he was told the person he needed to speak to was not in and they never called back.'

Other strikers reported that CORE had ordered workers to return to work with arms and legs in casts, and in one instance demanded an employee return who was still connected to an intravenous injection.

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