

Telephone workers strike US West

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Sunday morning 34,400 telephone workers in 13 western states of the United States walked off the job in a dispute involving regional phone company US West and the Communication Workers of America (CWA). The company is demanding health benefit concessions, continued high-levels of mandatory overtime and a system which would tie wage increases to job performance. This is the company's first strike since it emerged as one of the regional 'Baby Bell' phone companies from the break up of AT & T in 1984.

A federal mediator urged CWA and US West negotiators to take a day off Monday to reassess their positions. No new talks have been scheduled.

The Denver-based company's 25 million customers have been affected by delays in repairs, installation and directory assistance calls. The company said it had trained 15,000 management employees who will work 12 hours-a-day, seven days-a-week to maintain operations. US West has blamed some phone service interruptions on alleged acts of vandalism.

One of the company's major demands is that workers accept inferior family medical coverage or pay more out-of-pocket expenses to retain their present level of health insurance. The present managed health care system, worked out jointly by the CWA and management, saved the company \$4 million last year. US West is seeking further cost reductions. According to the union, if workers did not switch to a health care scheme selected by the company, they would have to pay an additional \$1,370 in Denver, \$2,400 in Utah and \$3,800 in Washington state to maintain their present coverage.

Thousands of US West employees are also angered because they are forced to work 60 hours or more a week. Over the last five years, US West has downsized its unionized workforce by 12.5 percent while increasing the number of access lines it operates by 20 percent. This has led to a huge increase in mandatory

overtime.

US West wants to maintain unlimited levels of overtime this year and has proposed a limit of 65 hours a week starting next year. The company also wants to slash premium pay so that workers can be compelled to work 12 or 14 hours a day at normal 'straight time' pay rates.

In addition, US West wants to base salary increases for maintenance and installation technicians on job performance, the first such proposal by a regional phone company. Under this system, technicians would have to meet precise time standards for job completion and would be penalized for factors beyond their control like driving distances, changing weather conditions and incorrect job dispatching. Workers would also be pressed to shorten and rush their visits to customers, and cut corners on safety.

The CWA is not opposed to pay-for-performance plans in principle. It has already agreed to such a system for US West sales representatives and sets productivity goals jointly with management. However, a CWA spokesperson said the new proposal for technicians was 'unworkable' because management 'does not have a good sense of measure' to set targets unilaterally.

As in the previous negotiations with the telecommunications companies this year, one of the chief concerns of the CWA leadership is getting access to the growing number of nonunion employees who work in US West's growth areas, like data networking and Internet services. In the agreements signed over the last few months with Bell Atlantic, Bell South, Ameritech and others, the companies agreed to 'expedited' union elections at many of their nonunion facilities. Management voluntarily acceded to the union's demands on this question because in previous agreements, the CWA has agreed to substandard wage and benefits in exchange for the opportunity to collect

union dues.

The rapid advances in technology, coupled with the ruthless competition unleashed by government deregulation, have led to ever more demands for a flexible and low-paid work force. Far from opposing these attacks, the CWA has collaborated with the phone companies to slash costs and enable them to compete with nonunion local exchange carriers. CWA President Morton Bahr sits on President Clinton's Advisory Commission on the Information Infrastructure and is a supporter of the bipartisan Telecommunications Reform Act of 1996 which further opened the door to unrestrained cost-cutting and downsizing in the industry.

On August 9 the CWA called a strike by 73,000 workers at Bell Atlantic after workers refused to work overtime and launched a wildcat strike in New York on the eve of the contract expiration. Fifty-eight hours later the union called off the strike and signed an agreement that was hailed by Bell Atlantic and Wall Street.

The CWA's record of collaboration with the phone companies has undoubtedly encouraged US West management to press ahead with its demands for sweeping concessions.

See Also:

US telephone workers union ends strike against Bell Atlantic

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