New talks in US West strike

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US West and the Communications Workers of America (CWA) returned to the bargaining table August 19 in the fourth day of the strike by 32,000 telephone workers in 13 midwestern and western states.

Among the issues being contended by union and management are health-care benefits and scheduling flexibility. But the strike was most directly precipitated by US West's demand for mandatory overtime and the proposed implementation of a performance-pay plan.

The pay plan effects customer-sales representatives and repair technicians and would base bonuses of up to 20 percent on job performance. But for technicians a variety of unforeseen problems such as outdated maps, equipment failures and weather can disrupt their routine making it impossible to fairly implement a comparative assessment along the lines the company seeks. The CWA, while rejecting basing performance pay on the individual, has advanced a proposal that bases bonuses on team performance which is similar to plans at other Baby Bells.

But looming over all issues is the company's policy of mandatory overtime. The explosive growth in the communications field has created an enormous demand for services and US West has responded by overworking its employees, often up to 60 hours a week. The CWA alleges US West employees worked 6.5 million hours of overtime in 1997 - equal to 3,200 jobs.

US West has dispatched 15,000 management personnel to try to fill the jobs of strikers. The strike has increased delays for directory assistance, cut services to handicapped and where storms and equipment failures occur companies and government agencies have found their telephone and computer systems down with little prospect for immediate restoration of service. New installations of phone services are also behind.

As talks prepared to resume under a federal mediator, the union and company filed unfair labor practices against each other. US West charged the union 'with no intent to reach an agreement' while the CWA retorts the company has failed to provide adequate information.

US West has responded to the growing competitive pressures by spinning off operations to non-union subsidiaries and overworking its workforce. In the current negotiations they hope to obtain working agreements that provide greater opportunities to exploit their employees than those agreements reached at other Baby Bells.

The union has made known that they have a $175 million strike fund which would provide strikers $200 a week for a 25-week period. Union officials have let it be known they expect a 'long strike.'

The sharp conflict between the union and company is not to be attributed to a determination of CWA leaders to defend the strikers. Rather, it is the fear of the labor bureaucracy that US West's need for deeper cuts in the living standards might also reduce the role of the union in sharing in these exploits.

A CWA communication charges US West with the 'lowest earnings growth among its peers in the last five years... Rather than taking the necessary steps to improve shareholder value, US West has elected to take actions to undermine shareholder value by provoking a strike with its largest labor union.

'Management at other major communication companies have deepened their partnerships with their employees and their unions to take advantage of the unique growth opportunities in today's dynamic market. This year CWA has signed new labor agreements with SBC Communications, AT&T, Lucent, Bell Atlantic, BellSouth and Ameritech. All these companies have led US West in building shareholder value and have opted for growth with labor peace.'

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