

Telephone workers union agrees to productivity pay and forced overtime

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The Communication Workers of America will take part in setting production levels for field technicians as part of a three-year agreement reached between the telephone workers union and US West late Sunday night, ending the 15-day-old strike.

The tentative contract meets one of US West's major concerns, boosting productivity for installation and repair technicians. Under the agreement future pay raises for technicians will be linked to meeting performance levels set by a joint union-management committee.

While details of the agreement have not yet been announced, US West had demanded up to 20 percent of workers' pay linked to productivity. The CWA maintains that the plan will be voluntary, but a similar productivity pay scheme agreed to by the union in 1995 for service representatives now covers more than 80 percent of these workers.

The other major issue in dispute was forced overtime. US West had been working employees up to 60, and in some cases 70, hours a week. Under the terms of the tentative contract, the union agreed to the company's demand for unlimited overtime for the remainder of the year. Starting in 1999 the company will be able to force 16 hours of overtime a week. Only in 2000 will this be lowered to 12 hours a week, and then 10 hours in 2001.

Under the pact, the company can force workers to work six- and seven-day weeks for the rest of the year. Only beginning next year will workers be entitled to one five-day week per month, and in 2001 this will be increased to two weeks per month. Even these meager limits on forced overtime can be waived if the company considers it an emergency.

The US West-CWA agreement to boost productivity and effectively lengthen the workweek is meant to make up for jobs cuts, and meet the increased demand

for telephone service due in part to the explosive growth caused by Internet use. During the past five years US West cut 5,000 jobs while increasing the number of access lines by 20 percent.

On the major issue of health care, the union and the company agreed to work out the details through a joint CWA-US West committee. The company had been demanding that workers begin paying a substantial share of the costs.

No announcement has yet been made on the union's main demand for access to US West's fast growing Internet, wireless and cable television business. The CWA had said this was its main goal and that it was willing to make concessions in other areas. At the other Bell companies, the CWA agreed that workers in these high-tech areas be paid substandard wages and benefits in exchange for management's agreement to CWA representation for the workers.

The strike by 34,000 technicians, operators, service representatives and clerical and administrative staff began August 15, affecting customers in 13 states out of US West's 14-state region. Workers began returning to work Monday, with all workers expected to be back to work by Tuesday. Voting on the tentative pact will take place by mail after Labor Day.

See Also:

US West hardens stand against striking telephone workers

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