Strike at Canada's largest telephone company

A correspondent
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Nine thousand five hundred Bell Canada technicians and operators, members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union, began strike action midnight Thursday. In fact, thousands of Bell workers walked off the job well before the strike deadline. Picket lines went up at all Bell facilities in Toronto and Montreal Thursday morning and as the day progressed workers walked of the job in Hamilton, Peterborough, and other cities.

"Our members are anxious to send a message to Bell that they're damn serious about improved job security," said CEP official Richard Long.

Bell Canada is Canada's largest telephone company with 7 million customers in Ontario and Quebec. It is a subsidiary of Bell Canada Enterprises, one of the country's most profitable companies.

The key issue in dispute is Bell's plan to spin off its operator service division to a new company, Nordia, that is to be co-owned by Bell and an Arizona company, Excell Global Services, that specializes in running low-wage call centers. Bell's Nordia scheme calls for 900 of the 2,300 operators to lose their jobs and for the number of operator centers to be reduced from more than fifty to just four.

Bell spokesmen say the company's plan to buy out 900 operators and turn the remaining 1,400 over to the new company is not negotiable. Bell is only willing to negotiate over severance packages.

The telephone company is also resisting a union demand for guarantees that it won't spin off the technicians' work. Bell claims to have offered a 12 percent pay increase to the technicians in a five-year contract, but some classifications are being offered no pay increase at all. Bell is also seeking significant reductions in benefit plans and concessions on work rules.

Negotiations broke off Friday morning. According to CEP representative Long, "Bell has a history of accepting a long strike rather than revising an offer."

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