Canada: Telus workers confront ferocious assault on job security

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31 August 2005

Twelve-thousand five-hundred Telus workers in British Columbia and Alberta have been walking the picket lines since July 21. The conflict has been provoked by Telus, the largest telecommunications company in western Canada, with the intention of busting the union and shredding what few obstacles remain to the contracting out of any part of the company's operations.

In spring 2005, Telus management bypassed the workers' union, the Telecommunications Workers Union (TWU), in order to directly "propose" to the workers a contract that would have gutted previous restrictions on contracting out so that only permanent employees would have any job security. Even this was to be subject to numerous further limits and qualifications, such as that only "current work" (as opposed to future work) would be protected.

Despite going nearly five years without a contract and despite a modest pay increase that was subsequently dangled as an incentive, the majority of Telus workers rejected the company's concession-laden offer. In June, the company escalated the dispute by engaging in "soft lockout" measures, including withholding pay for the first day of sick leave and reducing shift premiums. The workers then began to withhold some services, such as overtime work.

Telus next threatened to unilaterally impose its contract offer on July 22. The workers' response to this bald provocation was to walk off the job the day before the imposed conditions were to have taken effect. The company then locked out the workers, announcing that it will not resume negotiations with the union until the picket lines are taken down.

Telus has retained the services of the Accufax International Group (AFI), a private security firm that specializes in strike-breaking, i.e., hiring replacement workers, transporting scabs and management through picket lines, and harassing and intimidating picketers. A striker told the World Socialist Web Site, "On the picket line the biggest and most disheartening thing for me is the security guards that Telus has hired to watch, videotape, intimidate and harass the locked out workers ... They are there 24/7. They follow us continually." He further explained that in the months leading up to the strike-lockout, Telus management had installed security cameras in various work locations in anticipation of the confrontation it was plotting to provoke.

In the early days of the walkout the company obtained an injunction limiting picketing in British Columbia. The company also attempted to use its position as a major internet service provider for BC and Alberta to block access to the Voices for Change website, a union discussion forum organized by Telus workers. The site, along with 750 unrelated websites, was blocked for all Telus internet customers. At first, Telus denied the attempted censorship, only to later admit it, claiming that the measure was necessary to protect the identity of a handful of workers who have crossed the picket lines.

The website was subsequently unblocked as part of an out of court settlement between Telus and Voices For Change, under which Voices of Change agreed to remove any photos that could be used to identify workers who had crossed the picket lines. Shortly thereafter, management invited television news reporters directly into the workplace in order to show the very same workers at work, as part of an attempt to bolster its claim that a large section of the Telus workers have broken ranks with the strike.

Telus' antiunion offensive points to a major intensification of the class struggle and underlines the urgent need for workers to adopt a new strategy to defeat the ever-widening big business assault on jobs and working conditions.

The telecommunications industry, in particular, is undergoing substantial transformation under the pressure

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of two factors. First, there are continuous improvements to technology, many of which have served to undermine the traditional monopoly of telecommunications giants such as Bell Canada and Telus. Of especial importance in this regard is the development of Voice Over IP (VOIP) technology, which has facilitated the emergence of new long-distance and local telephone companies offering lower rates.

The second factor is the continuing impact of the dot-com stock market crash of 2001. The late 1990s saw a massive influx of capital into the telecommunications industry and consequent rapid expansion of infrastructure as investors sought to reap whirlwind profits from mounting share prices. Since the bubble was punctured, the industry has been confronted with declining profits, a problem that threatens to persist due to the large excess of infrastructure.

Faced with these conditions, the telecommunications companies have turned to fierce competition and a mounting drive to increase the profits they squeezed from their shrinking workforces. Bell Canada, historically based in the eastern half of the country, is making efforts to penetrate western Canada, which is dominated by Telus. At the same time, Telus is attempting to increase its presence in Ontario and Quebec, where Bell once had a monopoly.

This competition for markets has been accompanied by a wave of mergers and "rationalizations." In the US, Verizon acquired MCI, SBC merged with AT&T, and the number of large carriers has shrunk to only three from more than ten a decade ago. In Canada as well, large companies are swallowing smaller ones in an effort to diversify their technology, overcome competition, and reduce labour costs. The present-day Telus is itself the result of a merger of British Columbia-based BC Tel with the former Alberta-based Telus.

In every instance, the response of the union leadership to the inevitable and systematic assault on their members' livelihoods has been to confine the workers' struggle within the framework of collective bargaining with a single employer. The result has been an ongoing series of bitter defeats.

In late spring of 2003, a year-long strike by technicians at Vidéotron resulted in a concession-laden deal that gave the company increased ability to contract out work and imposed punishing wage cuts. Last summer, a five-month long strike by workers at Aliant, Atlantic Canada's largest telecommunications company, ended in the ratification of a six-year contract that failed to bar the company from contracting out, the central objective of the strike.

In the months prior to the present struggle at Telus, the federal government offered to provide a mediator to resolve the contract dispute, a proposal which the TWU leadership welcomed and which Telus management rejected. The TWU leaders have also made much of a Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) ruling that Telus has failed to bargain in good faith with the workers. Predictably, the ruling did not include any punitive sanctions.

Since the walkout began, the extent of the union leadership's efforts to widen the struggle has been a radio campaign asking Telus customers to cancel their extended phone features, i.e. to avoid "hurting" the company too much. In the words of TWU vice-president Peter Massy, "Telus is out of line and out of control. This company needs to be reined in by the consumers and law-makers of this country."

Massy's words encapsulate the dead-end into which the limited, nationalist perspective of trade unionism has brought workers. Faced with an all-out assault on his members' jobs, the most the latter-day trade union bureaucrat can do is to issue timid appeals to consumers and to the supposedly enlightened politicians of the big business Liberal Party.

In every country and in every sector of production, the defence of the jobs, wages, pensions and working conditions of workers requires a new strategy based on an international socialist program. Instead of subordinating their demands to the requirements of the market and the profit demands of this or that section of big business, workers must combine militant industrial action with a political struggle aimed at bringing to power a workers' government so that economic life can be radically reorganized to meet the needs of the working class and society at large. Vital industries such as telecommunications should be placed under public ownership and subject to the democratic control of the international working class.

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