

Interviews with locked-out Canadian Telus workers

Our correspondent
15 October 2005

12,500 workers at Telus, the largest telecommunications company in the Canadian west, have been locked out for nearly three months. In late July the workers walked out the day before Telus was going to impose a contract that would have eliminated nearly all restrictions on the contracting out of their work. The company responded to the walkout by immediately locking out the workers.

The union representing the workers, the Telecommunications Workers Union (TWU), recently announced that it had reached a settlement with Telus. No details have been released pending a prolonged ratification process, which will serve to break down the resistance of workers to an agreement that by all indications will represent a bitter defeat. (See “As British Columbia teachers strike erupts: Canadian TWU terminates Telus workers’ struggle”)

Recently, a *World Socialist Web Site* correspondent visited the picket lines and spoke to some of the locked-out workers. For fear of recrimination by the company, all of those he spoke to insisted that they not be identified in any published interview. Indeed, in September the company summarily dismissed 14 workers for alleged “inappropriate behaviour” at one picket location.

Asked about the situation at the company in the months leading up to the lockout, one woman pointed to the company’s deliberate provocation of the conflict: “I think our current CEO Darren Entwistle was brought in to break the union. It’s what he just did in Britain before he came over here. [Entwistle was president of Cable and Wireless UK and Ireland until 2001.] He ran that company right into the ground—but he broke the union. So he walks away with his big bonuses, that’s what he’s been trying to do here. He has brought in a very elitist style of management. Intimidation is one of

his biggest tools.”

She continued: “They have been doing everything they can in the last five years to try to break us down. He actually said in front of a whole group of people he was giving a speech to—and it’s a little crude, but he said this. He said, ‘This is a new era. This is a new phone company. Fit in or f___ off.’”

The leadership of the Telecommunications Workers Union (TWU) has gone out of its way to confine the struggle within the framework of collective bargaining with a single employer. On the one hand, the TWU has appealed to the pro-business politicians of the federal Liberal government to intervene in the dispute, on the other hand it has launched a consumer boycott campaign asking Telus customers to cancel their extended phone features.

Asked about the efficacy of the consumer boycott tactic, she replied: “It’s a risky move because you may not get your customers back, but it’s the only thing this company will understand—losing the money and the customer base. So while it’s risky it’s something that you’ve got to do anyway. He will not pay attention if he’s still getting the money in.”

She acknowledged that Telus stock has continued to rise, at one point trading as much as 16 percent higher than in the time immediately preceding the lockout: “Absolutely. The stock is still going up. You’ve got a lot of right-wing investors who think that the union’s going to fold. That’s why the stock’s going up. So it’s not working the way they thought. They have lost a lot of customers.”

In Alberta, an unknown number of workers crossed the picket line and returned to work. (In British Columbia, meanwhile, the company forbids workers from crossing the picket lines, citing supposed safety concerns.) Telus claims that 60 percent of the workers

in Alberta have pulled out of the job action—although the company clearly has every reason to exaggerate this figure.

Asked about a claim made by Entwistle that as many as 70 percent of Alberta workers were reporting to work, she replied: “There’s no way that they have that many people crossing the line. It’s a numbers game to them. They want to look good to the public. They want to look good to the investors and they want to try to destroy the morale in BC. It’s a pure attempt to break the union and they don’t care if it’s true or not. There are more crossing the line in Alberta than here. I think you’d be hard pressed to find some here. There’s a few. They say there’s none. We know there’s some. They’re lying on both sides.”

Another woman, interviewed outside of the Newton central office, had this to say about the same issue: “The reason why I think they’re doing it [exaggerating the number crossing the picket lines] is they’re trying to break up the union. Because there are a lot of people that have just started with Telus that are picketing out here. By them hearing that, you know, ‘Oh, my gosh there’s this many people that have crossed. Maybe I should cross as well.’ Those people that are in the middle, that have just started their jobs at Telus that are kind of in the limbo of—should I cross or should I not?—it’s getting to them.”

Neither the conflict itself nor the ferocity with which Telus has been waging its antiunion offensive are in the slightest bit surprising. In Canada alone, there has been a series of recent struggles by workers against telecommunications companies seeking to extricate themselves from falling profits by contracting out and thereby lowering labour costs.

In 2003 at Vidéotron in Québec, and then in 2004 at Aliant in the eastern Maritime provinces, there were long and bitter struggles that were defeated by virtue of the fact that the union bureaucracy systematically isolated them and promoted the bankrupt strategy of appealing to the big business politicians to come to the strikers’ aid. The TWU leadership in BC and Alberta is conducting itself no differently than its peers in Québec and the Maritimes. None of the workers with whom our correspondent spoke were familiar with these recent struggles, despite their taking place in the last two years in the very same industry in the very same part of the world.

A worker interviewed outside of the Newton central office expressed his doubts about the TWU’s consumer boycott campaign and criticized the union leadership for failing to communicate with the rank and file: “I don’t necessarily agree with them. I haven’t heard much. There seems to be a lack of information. There must be some better options because this might backfire on them.”

The same worker expressed his opposition to the war in Iraq, which he described as “only in the interests of the US government,” and criticized the Bush administration’s response to the Katrina disaster.



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