

# US union prepares betrayal of 40,000 working without a contract at AT&T

Samuel Davidson  
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Members of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) employed by communications giant AT&T have been working without a contract for more than a week on the instructions of the union. Before the contracts covering the 40,000 members in different bargaining units expired on April 8, an average of 93 percent of the workers voted to authorize a strike.

AT&T is demanding massive concessions from its workforce, including cuts in wages, health care, pensions, time off and jobs. The CWA has not outlined its demands other than to say it is seeking a fair contract. In reality, the union is prepared to accept major concessions.

AT&T, with more than 300,000 employees, is the nation's largest provider of telecommunications, including wireline, wireless, Internet and cable TV. AT&T made more than \$20 billion in profits last year. Like its major competitor, Verizon, AT&T is citing a declining wireline business—AT&T has seen the number of its wirelines go from 65 million in 2006 to fewer than 40 million today—to justify the concessions. More people are opting out of the expense of a home phone and using cell phones as their primary source of phone communication.

The 40,000 workers include both technicians and call center workers. The majority of the workers are spread across the Midwest and West Coast in California, Nevada, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin. About 4,000 workers work in Connecticut and other New England states, while 6,000 workers are spread throughout the country in what is called the AT&T Legacy unit.

The company is demanding that workers pay a greater share for health care, citing the fact that union workers at AT&T pay only about a third of what workers on average pay for such benefits.

AT&T is also demanding massive concessions in pensions and benefits for retired workers. Currently, there are 335,000 retirees at the company. AT&T is following a national trend in cutting pensions for retirees. Since 1996, the number of Fortune 500 companies that provided employees with a pension plan fell from 335 to fewer than 170.

While AT&T is demanding massive concessions from its workers and retirees, AT&T continues to pay its top executives outlandishly. In 2010, AT&T Chairman, CEO and President Randall L. Stephenson made \$27,341,628 in salary and benefits.

The decision of the CWA not to call a strike, but to continue bargaining without a contract, follows a long pattern in which the CWA leadership has worked to divide and weaken the strength of the workers.

At Verizon, 55,000 CWA and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) employees have been working without a contract since August of last year. Workers there were on strike for two weeks, but it was called off by the union with the claim that the company had agreed to negotiate with the workers.

Since agreeing to return to work at Verizon, 40 workers have been fired by the company for their role during the two-week strike. Countless other workers have been fired and victimized for speaking out against the company and the betrayal of the union.

In addition, Verizon began laying off hundreds of workers this month, citing falling demand in its wireline business.

While the CWA agreed to work without a contract at AT&T for 40,000 workers, the union signed a contract covering 9,000 workers at the AT&T wireless division. Those workers receive substantially less pay and benefits than workers in the wireline divisions. The four-year contract provides for wage increases of only 2

to 2.5 percent a year, less than the rate of inflation.

The CWA has been pushing to organize workers in the wireless divisions of both AT&T and Verizon, not to fight for better wages and benefits for those workers, but to offset the loss in dues from the declining work force in the wireline divisions. For its part, AT&T has sought to work with the CWA, allowing it to organize the wireless workers with the knowledge that the union will assist the company in keeping wages and benefits down.

Verizon, on the other hand, has pursued a strategy of opposing the union's organizing efforts. Verizon Wireless, Comcast and several other leading cable providers are working on a deal in which Verizon Wireless will resell Internet, TV and voice service using the cable TV networks, making the company a direct competitor with the company's own wireline division.

While refusing to mobilize workers against both AT&T's and Verizon's attack on its members, the CWA is seeking to divert workers' anger into general protests against "corporate greed." The CWA is actively working within a coalition of organizations referred to as "99% Spring." Adopting the slogan from the Occupy Wall Street movement, this coalition seeks to divert the anger of workers and students into worthless protest politics and behind the re-election campaign of Obama in the 2012 election.



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