

AT&T workers reject contract, face déjà vu betrayal by union

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On March 21, AT&T West workers resoundingly rejected a proposed contract that would have capped wages at \$22 an hour and offered paltry health care plans, while demanding increased pension contributions. AT&T West workers have been working without a contract since April of last year. After the rejection of the contract, workers voted to authorize strike action.

The Communication Workers of America (CWA) union resumed negotiations with the company the following day. Growing militancy of the rank-and-file workers is being stifled by their alleged representatives, making the possibility of a strike and its subsequent quelling by the CWA ever more likely.

Responding to the rejection of the contract and the prospect of a strike, CWA District 9 representative and president T. Santora said, “We regret it had to come to this.” Vice President Jim Weitkamp also offered his dismay, stating, “Clearly, our members are strong in their convictions.” Elaborating on the next steps for the negotiations process Weitkamp offered, “What happens next will be determined in large part by the company’s response.”

On April 1, the CWA leadership announced that another tentative agreement had been reached. This move will once again avert even a nominal attempt to strike action, while the new proposal is essentially identical to the previous deal.

As has become typical trade union procedure, the agreement will be “explained” on April 9 and April 11. In other words, the CWA will once again attempt to shove it down the workers’ throats, with virtually no chance to even discuss it. A final vote count is expected by May 1.

A similar situation is developing between the CWA and AT&T Mobility with their proposed “Orange”

contract negotiations. The agreement, which would cover workers across 36 states and the District of Columbia, could become effective as early as April 5. If passed, the contract will be valid for four years.

The proposed agreement includes a “No Strike—No Lockout” clause which promises no sanctioned actions taken by the union throughout the duration of the contract and guarantees arbitration between AT&T Mobility and CWA leadership to “bring any such unauthorized action to an end”.

Most notable is the new pay scale developed throughout deliberation. While the new contract has eliminated the lowest two Pay Steps in the Compensation Scale, this does not stop the base wages from being dramatically impacted.

To highlight this, one can look towards the Starting Rate of Service Technicians. These employees risk their lives by climbing telephone poles and face many hazards including the potentiality of electrical shocks for a starting rate of \$12 an hour. The contract promises a successive 2 percent to 3 percent increase for the top employees over the term of the four-year contract via a 0.25% increase over each year. At the end of the contract, this would result in an increase from \$26 an hour to \$28 an hour. If workers remain at the lowest tier of wages throughout the duration of their employment they would not receive any increase in wages.

The CWA is no stranger to blocking opposition and strangling the militancy of its base in its infancy. In August 2011, 45,000 Verizon workers went on strike against wages and benefits concessions worth \$1 billion.

The CWA was able to sell out the strike after promising renewed negotiations and better terms. They were able to pass the exact same concessions one year after the initial attempt, once they had demobilized and

demoralized workers.

Even more recently are the combined publicity stunts of CWA in conjunction with a multitude of other unions including Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) in Long Beach, California and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in Wichita, Kansas.

The joint effort between CWA and ATU included a “media and community campaign” to pressure county commissioners to “do the right thing” by making real raise wages as part of the coming negotiations. This campaign consisted of empty actions like sponsoring billboards, bus ads, newspaper ads and calls for the community to phone in their concerns to the county commissioner’s office. The common thread of these actions is to cultivate the illusion that unions defend the interests of workers.

In Wichita, the AFT and CWA held a one-day rally to prevent the elimination of 350 jobs through the closing of a local call center. Recently, the merger of T-Mobile and MetroPCS has resulted in an attack on workers through the elimination of domestic call centers as a means of outsourcing. The unions’ solution is a chauvinistic call for the “preservation of American jobs”. This has become a euphemism to justify Obama’s “in-sourcing” strategy, which imposes poverty wages under the guise of returning jobs to the US.

The nationalistic rhetoric of the CWA provides not a strategy for workers but a defense of the capitalist system. Politically, the CWA, like most unions in the US, seeks to subordinate workers to the Democratic Party. A case in point is Senator Barbara Buono of New Jersey, running for governor against Republican Chris Christie with the full support of the CWA. The Buono campaign, like the Democratic administration of Barack Obama, has presented itself as the more capable of the two big business parties in carrying out austerity.

A group of 18 prominent lawmakers from New Jersey issued a statement in support of Buono, declaring that, “she fought to make government more fiscally responsible by cutting \$4.5 billion from the state budget.”

If telecommunication workers wish to preserve their jobs, increase their wages and protect their healthcare benefits they must be prepared to launch a struggle against the entire capitalist framework, including the Democratic Party and its trade union defenders. These

organizations seek not to produce improved conditions for domestic workers but on the contrary, to create an environment in which domestic exploitation is all the more ruthless, creating more ability for usurpation of union dues and increase of corporate profit.

The immediate task for telecommunication workers is the creation of rank-and-file committees dedicated to leading the struggle against both the corporate oligarchy of AT&T, Verizon, et al, as well as the union leadership. These committees should seek to unite with workers of all other industries and countries to assist in their struggle against the world capitalist system. We urge telecom workers to contact the Socialist Equality Party to begin this work.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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