

Union forces AT&T West workers to continue working after contract expiration

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Sixteen thousand workers at AT&T have been ordered by their union, the Communications Workers of America (CWA), to continue working following the expiration of their contract April 9. The workers are in the AT&T West division, formerly Pacific Bell, which covers AT&T landline operations in California and Nevada.

Two hundred other communications workers in Connecticut also have been ordered to continue working after their contract expired.

The CWA is working systematically to isolate different sections of telecommunications workers and prevent a unified struggle. There are currently 39,000 Verizon workers on strike in the US Northeast, and the union is determined to prevent their fight from sparking a broader rebellion of telecommunications workers and other sections of the working class.

The CWA and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) fear that a united struggle against the multinational giants would quickly get out of their control and develop into a political confrontation with the Democratic Party.

Ignoring a 95 percent strike authorization vote of the AT&T West workers, CWA's District 9 Vice President Tom Runnion said, "We're going to continue fighting for a fair contract while we stay on the job." In 2013 workers rejected the last contract before having it forced upon them by the CWA. Since then, AT&T has cut over 2,000 jobs in the West division.

There are 150,000 AT&T workers in the CWA. Last year the union ordered 24,000 workers in nine southeastern states to remain on the job after their contract expired August 6. In October, the CWA negotiated a concessions contract that included cuts to health care for both active and retired workers and changes to work rules that will lead to job cuts.

On February 18, the CWA contract expired for 9,400 workers at AT&T Southwest in Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma and Texas. The union forced workers to stay on the job through negotiations and a contract was ratified on March 10. The agreement includes concessions on health care, pensions and job security.

Information on negotiations from the CWA have been sparse, but AT&T is seeking similar cuts for workers in California and Nevada.

In 2015, AT&T reported revenue of \$147 billion, \$42.1 billion just for the fourth quarter alone, a 22 percent increase from the prior year. Of nearly \$16 billion in annual profit, \$10.2 billion was paid to shareholders in the form of dividends.

Despite the fact that it is reaping record profits, the company is seeking further concessions. The CWA is working with the company in exchange for AT&T's support for the union in continuing to "organize" (i.e., collect union dues from) workers in its wireless division.

In 2005, AT&T and the CWA signed a deal allowing the union to sign up members in the wireless division. Since then the CWA has signed up 19,000 members. This has not led to workers getting better pay and benefits or improved working conditions, but it has led to increased dues income for the union.



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