

AT&T West strike in San Diego begins to break CWA isolation of Verizon struggle

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The walkout Friday by some 1,700 AT&T West workers in San Diego, California is a sign of mounting anger in the working class over the ongoing corporate offensive against jobs, wages, pensions and health care. It comes as 39,000 workers at Verizon on the US East Coast are in the sixth week of a strike against the company's effort to destroy jobs and working conditions, and slash health care and pension benefits.

The strike at AT&T West is a challenge to the policy of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), which are trying to isolate the Verizon strike while colluding with the Obama administration to impose yet another defeat on the working class. Rather than calling a strike on both coasts, the CWA has forced 16,000 telecommunications workers at AT&T West in California and Nevada to work without a contract since April 9.

There is widespread opposition to the division of Verizon and AT&T workers, who work for the second and third largest telecommunications giants in the world and who face the same conditions. On the Facebook page of CWA Local 9505, AT&T workers denounced the decision to only call out workers in San Diego while 14,000 other workers continue to work and could be forced to make up the work from struck locations.

Rank-and-file workers should take the initiative and fight for a national strike throughout the telecommunication industry. Giant corporations, backed up by powerful financial institutions, are determined to destroy the jobs of thousands of higher-paid "legacy" workers, eliminate the gains won through generations of struggle and transform workers into low-paid casual labor.

Last week, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate

for US president, Jerry White, issued a statement calling for telecom workers to break the CWA's isolation of the Verizon strike. White noted that workers were not simply facing individual corporations but an entire class of capitalist owners backed by officials from both big-business parties, the courts, the police and the media.

White called for workers to establish rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to establish lines of communications with workers throughout the industry and fight for common action. At the same time, telecom workers must fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class to unite every section of workers against the attack on jobs and living standards.

Over the last three years, AT&T has spent more than \$20 billion annually on mergers, acquisitions and payoffs to its wealthy investors and top executives. This includes the takeover of DIRECTV in a \$63 billion deal last year and several billion more spent to buy wireless businesses in Mexico and the United States. The company had \$147 billion in revenue last year and has over \$400 billion in assets.

The conditions workers face due to speedup and management harassment were underscored by the death of 61-year-old Robert Alfred Hernandez, an AT&T worker whose lifeless body was found hanging from a utility pole in the Los Angeles area on May 13. Initial reports indicate he faced a medical emergency while working alone.

The fact that the walkout in San Diego has been almost totally blacked out by the corporate-controlled media reflects the potentially explosive nature of this development and the nervousness of the corporate and political establishment that the strike by workers at Verizon could spark a broader movement by the

working class.

Workers in San Diego manned lively and militant picket lines Friday. Those striking include technicians and call center operators who have been without a contract since early April. However, the union did not call the walkout over the contract, but instead over “unfair labor practices.” Local 9509 President Chris Roberts told the WSWs that the grievance, relating to employee monitoring, was limited to San Diego. The company says that it plans to maintain its operations by shifting calls to non-struck locations.

Workers complain about constant monitoring by management, which has refused to release reports on the results of this monitoring, as required by the contract. The CWA said it gave the company a request for the report, and that management refused to return it by the deadline.

In an effort to justify the partial strike, Local 9505 officials claimed that the rest of the AT&T West locals do not have the same grievance. In fact, the CWA clearly felt it had to take some action to contain growing opposition among AT&T workers but wants to limit this action as much as possible. AT&T, like Verizon, will use whatever time the CWA gives it to prepare a massive strikebreaking operation in the event that workers reject a contract offer.

The CWA is trying to come up with a deal that it can sell to members to end the walkout in San Diego. According to a report posted on the CWA Local 9509 web site, the union rejected a company offer Saturday calling for a return to work before it would turn over the requested report. The CWA said it was prepared to return to work immediately on receipt of the contractually required documents.

The CWA contract at AT&T West covers landline operations in California and Nevada. In 2013, AT&T West workers rejected a sellout contract before having it forced on them by the CWA.

According to Roberts, AT&T West is offering an insulting one percent annual wage increase while seeking to impose an eight percent annual increase in out-of-pocket health care costs. This would be in line with the strategy of the Obama administration, which has encouraged corporations to shift their health care costs onto the backs of workers. The company also wants to reduce annual paid sick time for current employees from 12 to 8 days and eliminate paid sick

time altogether for new hires.

AT&T West wants to freeze pensions for all workers hired after 1986, meaning that new hires will receive no pensions at all.

There are 150,000 workers at AT&T covered under CWA contracts. The union has kept the workers in various bargaining units isolated in order to allow the company to divide workers and impose concessions piecemeal. Last year, the CWA kept 24,000 AT&T workers in the southeastern states on the job after their contract expired. The union eventually agreed to a deal that contained concessions on health care and job security.

Earlier this year, the CWA extended the contract for 9,400 workers at AT&T Southwest. A deal ratified on March 10 contained significant concessions. Another 200 workers at AT&T East region in Connecticut are also working without a contract.

Meanwhile, 24,000 United Airlines flight attendants, members of the CWA-affiliated Association of Flight Attendants, continue to work without a contract. On Thursday, hundreds of United flight attendants and supporters demonstrated at Los Angeles International Airport and 14 airports around the world. The talks have been dragging on for five years since the merger of United and Continental.

The walkout in San Diego comes amidst mounting signs that the CWA intends to shut down the Verizon strike. Last week 88 Congressional Democrats, allies of the CWA bureaucracy, issued a statement calling for an end to the strike.

The union has agreed to federal mediation after previously pledging not to do so in the wake of the concessions contract imposed in the mediated 2011 contract talks. The CWA has presented the intervention of the anti-worker Obama administration as a welcome development, even as Obama’s National Labor Relation Board appealed for and received strikebreaking court injunctions limiting picketing.



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