CWA forces 21,000 AT&T Mobility workers to stay on job as contract expires

Mark Witkowski
27 February 2017

Nearly two weeks after the labor contract expired covering 21,000 AT&T Mobility wireless workers, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) continues to force its members to work although the CWA admits the parties "remain miles apart on all major issues." AT&T, which made $13 billion in 2016 profits, is demanding higher health care contributions, further limits on sick time, increased productivity and continued outsourcing of jobs.

The CWA agreed to an extension of the contract when it expired on February 11 even though rank-and-file workers had voted by 93 percent to authorize a strike. The extension agreement requires the union to give 72 hours' notice before a walkout.

Just four days later the CWA announced talks had broken off because "the company continues to make greedy and retrogressive demands." A two-week "cooling off period" agreed to on February 15 is scheduled to end this week and talks are supposed to resume.

The contract primarily covers technicians, retail workers and call center agents in locations in 37 states across every region of the United States except the South. Another 20,000 wireless workers in the South, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands have contracts with different expiration dates.

AT&T is the second largest wireless telecom carrier—just behind Verizon—in the United States with approximately 135 million wireless subscribers. The company generated $164 billion in revenues in 2016. The giant telecom is the result of mergers and acquisitions by AT&T, former regional Bell operating companies and other telecom providers.

Reflecting their determination to fight, workers have taken to expressing their anger on social media. One AT&T worker commented, "We need to go on strike, that's what we need to do. Giving us an extension of the contract we already have is a slap for all its employees. Nobody wants a strike but they can't go on without us."

Another wrote, "Let's shut them down … let them realize how much they really need us!!!"

Working past the expiration of the contract extension has become business as usual for the CWA, despite claims by some in the union bureaucracy that the election of Chris Shelton as president of CWA heralded the beginning of a new supposedly militant approach. The CWA has long abandoned its own former slogan of "no contract, no work."

Fifteen thousand AT&T West workers in California and Nevada have been working for nearly a year after the expiration of their contract. The eight-month extension the CWA granted Verizon gave the telecom giant ample time to organize and put its strikebreaking plan into effect once 39,000 workers walked out in April 2016.

The CWA organized impotent publicity stunts last week around the country. This included demoralizing "informational picketing" to inform customers about the expired contract and a social media campaign supposedly to shame AT&T for "corporate greed." A petition has also been circulated to pressure AT&T CEO Randall Stephenson to sign a "fair contract."

The CWA has a history of colluding with management to impose concessions on workers, including two-tiered pensions schemes which leave newer workers with no pension at all.

Most recently at Momentive—a former General Electric plastics plant in upstate New York—the CWA shut down a 15-week strike and forced workers back to work with pay and health care cuts.

The seven-week Verizon strike, despite being hailed

© World Socialist Web Site

as a “victory” by the CWA officials, saw workers forfeit wages only to be sent back to work by the CWA with concessions on health care and miniscule raises, which do not keep pace with inflation. In a holiday video message to employees, Verizon CEO McAdams commented, “We are building a better partnership with the union,” exemplifying the cozy relationship between the telecom giant and the CWA bureaucracy.

In May 2016, the CWA ended a four-day walkout by AT&T workers in San Diego to prevent a unified struggle with striking Verizon workers.

The CWA, which has the closest ties to the Democratic Party, has joined the stampede of unions to embrace Trump and his reactionary “America First” nationalism. CWA spokesperson Candice Johnson told Bloomberg News that AT&T “are selling service in the US and shifting work to places like India. President Trump made a lot of promises on the campaign trail, and we are going to hold him to it.”

CWA District 1 Vice President Dennis Trainor added, “Workers are making it clear and uniting together as one movement—we won’t rest until AT&T stops outsourcing and offshoring thousands of call center, retail and technician jobs in communities and cities across the country.”

Fortune magazine recently noted that AT&T—which is the largest private employer of full-time unionized workers in the US—“has seen a lengthy period of constructive dealings with the CWA and other unions.”

If AT&T Mobility and AT&T West workers are not to suffer the same fate as the betrayed Verizon workers, they must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the CWA through the election of rank-and-file committees. A campaign must begin now to unify all telecom workers in the US and internationally in a common struggle to defend jobs and living standards. This means rejecting the CWA’s insistence that the jobs and living standards of workers must be subordinated to the profit interest of the telecom companies and the wealthy financial institutions that stand behind them.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site