

CWA begins three-day strike at AT&T as US telecom workers press for real fight

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The Communications Workers of America (CWA) has begun a three-day strike involving 40,000 workers at AT&T West in California and Nevada and the company's wireless division, AT&T Mobility, with operations in 36 states. The workers, who have been laboring without a contract for a year, want improved wages and job security and are resisting increases in health insurance co-pays.

The strikes, which began Friday afternoon and end on Monday, are the latest in a series of diversionary stunts by the CWA and other unions to block a united struggle against the telecom giants. Under conditions where the industry and its biggest investors are amassing enormous profits, workers are determined to recoup past losses handed over by the CWA and make real gains.

The latest theatrics by the CWA follows a series of local "grievance strikes" called by the union as a means of defusing anger while causing minimal disruption to management. Meanwhile, a strike by 1,800 workers at Spectrum, formerly Time Warner Cable, in New York City and Bergen County, New Jersey is continuing into its seventh week. Spectrum was acquired by Charter Communications in a \$65 billion mega-merger in 2016.

The workers, members of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 3, are opposing the company's demand for pension and health care concessions and calling for a halt to the company's practice of penalizing workers for customer problems that stem from Spectrum's failing infrastructure.

It is clear from the isolation of these various struggles that neither the IBEW nor CWA has any intent or desire to build a unified fight of telecom workers. Instead their role has been to isolate the struggles of the workers they supposedly represent and to preside over the implementation of harsher work rules while pensions and healthcare benefits are reduced.

The attacks on telecom workers are being driven by the insatiable profit demands of the financial markets,

including huge financial equity firms, which increasingly dominate the industry. This has been accompanied by the drive to consolidate the industry in the hands of a few massive conglomerates.

The telecom's top executives are richly rewarded for slashing labor costs and boosting shareholder returns. AT&T's CEO Randall Stephenson made \$28.4 million in 2016, a 13.1 percent raise from the year before, while Time Warner CEO Jeff Bewkes made \$32.6 million last year.

Increasingly the major telecom providers are looking to become content providers rather than service providers, thus eliminating the expense of maintaining capital-intensive networks. They are doing this via mergers and acquisitions. For example, AT&T is seeking to buy Time Warner and there are reports that Verizon is open to a merger with, among others, Disney and Comcast.

The issue of telecom providers deferring maintenance or the build-out of their networks is neither new nor unique to Spectrum. It has become common practice among many providers. After years of acquisitions and mergers, resulting in fewer providers, the telecom companies have established what amounts to an industrywide cartel. For the most part they are satisfied to operate in service areas they have carved out for themselves without going head to head in another provider's territory.

Like the deregulation of the airline industry, the breakup of the Bell Telephone monopoly in the 1980s was supposed to increase competition, cut costs and provide better service. Just the opposite has taken place, with a return to the concentration of ownership in the hands of a small number of telecommunication monopolies.

The absence of any real competition combined with years of deregulation has allowed the carriers to scale back on maintenance, with the inevitable result of frequent service failures. Instead of maintaining their networks, carriers funnel revenues into dividends and

stock buybacks for their richest investors. Putting off maintenance costs keeps their revenues artificially high, which in turn inflates their share prices.

In turn, customers end up with service that does not live up to the promised quality standards. They are often left without service in the event of a storm, while the companies attempt to shift the blame for problems caused by inadequate investment onto the shoulders of workers. At Spectrum, workers are being threatened, harassed, disciplined or kept from progression if they repeat a service call to the same customers even though these problems are often caused by the long-term lack of maintenance.

At Verizon workers face similar issues in the company's landline division that includes its popular FiOS television service. In 2016, the CWA and the IBEW isolated and betrayed a six-week strike by 39,000 Verizon workers, imposing a sellout deal that imposed higher health care costs and facilitated layoffs. The AFL-CIO and other unions blocked a common fight by telecom workers and millions of industrial workers because the unions backed Obama and his strategy of slashing corporate health costs and imposing what amounted to an eight-year freeze in real wages.

Every step of a technician's day is tracked and monitored to squeeze as much from each worker as possible. Meanwhile, Verizon continues to build out its FiOS (fiber optic) Internet service in lucrative markets, typically affluent areas with high population density. At the same time, rural and impoverished regions in the Verizon area are left without Internet cable access. Workers at ATT retail stores, call centers and elsewhere are subject to intense scrutiny during their workday. Workers at ATT retail locations who spend hours standing have been written up and disciplined for merely leaning on a counter.

While the union executives often make rhetorical criticisms of "corporate greed" they advance the corporatist program of union-management cooperation based on the supposed identity of the interests of workers and management. On this basis, the unions collaborate with the companies to drive up worker productivity and reduce benefits such as healthcare and pensions to ensure the "competitiveness" of the telecoms against their overseas rivals.

At the same time the unions promote the idea that the Democratic Party can be pressured to support the interests of workers. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Democrats were the pioneers of deregulation, which has

been the spearhead of a never-ending series of attacks on the jobs and working conditions of telecom workers, and Obamacare paved the way for Trump's attack on health benefits.

Rather than carry out a struggle to defend jobs, the telecom unions have sought to stoke hostility against brother telecom workers globally. Thus, while seeking to pressure the Democrats, the CWA and the IBEW are cozying up to the Trump administration based on his reactionary America First nationalism. The CWA has joined with members of Congress to call on Trump to sign an executive order to halt the offshoring of call center jobs.

This has nothing to do with a fight to defend jobs, which requires the international unity of the working class against the multinationals. The entire strategy of the unions is based on preventing a struggle against the capitalist system, which subordinates the interests of workers to the profit interests of the corporations and Wall Street. In return for imposing management's dictates the unions are ensured the continued flow of dues money and management subsidies that fund the lavish perks and privileges of the labor apparatus.

To wage a successful fight telecom workers must organize rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-company unions and the two big-business parties. These committees must base themselves on the methods of the class struggle, fighting to mobilize the telecom workers throughout the US and internationally. The companies are merging their resources. Why shouldn't workers merge their own power and employ it collectively?

At the same time workers must insist that they have nonnegotiable rights to good-paying and secure jobs, health care and comfortable retirement, regardless of what the top executives and Wall Street say they can afford.

Vital services essential to the wellbeing of a modern society cannot be left to the vicissitudes of the market or the dictates of the oligarchs who sit atop it. These services, including the telecom, must be nationalized immediately, placed under the direct democratic control of the working class as part of a planned socialist economy.



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