

“It is time we all stood up”

AT&T workers call for broader fight as CWA ends weekend strike

Our reporting teams
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Thousands of AT&T workers manned picket lines over the weekend to press for improved wages and job security and oppose the telecom corporation’s demands for sweeping health care concessions. According to the Communications Workers of America (CWA), the three-day strike involved up to 40,000 workers at AT&T Mobility in 36 states and Washington, DC, as well as workers at AT&T West (California, Nevada and Hawaii), AT&T East (Connecticut) and DIRECTV (California and Nevada).

Most of the workers have been laboring without a contract for months or up to a year. The CWA called the limited job action, which included token pickets at mobile phone retail stores, to allow workers to blow off some steam and reinforce the authority of union over an increasingly restive workforce. Rank-and-file workers are determined to recoup past givebacks granted by the CWA to the world’s largest telecom, which raked in \$13 billion in profits in 2016 and is currently involved in an \$85 billion merger with Time Warner.

Nearly 40,000 workers struck the number two telecommunications company, Verizon, last year, and 1,500 workers in New York and New Jersey are currently on strike against Spectrum, formerly Time Warner Cable. In every case the highly profitable corporations are slashing jobs, monitoring workers to increase output and punishing technicians for customer problems, which stem from a crumbling and poorly maintained infrastructure even as billions are squandered on deals to enrich top shareholders and executives.

Far from uniting all telecom workers in a common struggle, the CWA, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) and other unions have deliberately isolated the different sections of workers and strung out negotiations for months, if not years. If forced to call a walkout, the unions wear down workers with fruitless publicity stunts and starvation strike benefits before imposing management’s dictates. The Verizon strike, hailed as a resounding victory by the CWA and the liberal and “left” supporters of the trade union bureaucracy, was a serious defeat, paving the way for the destruction of jobs and deep health care concessions.

Once again, the CWA is urging AT&T workers to rely on

various Democratic politicians, although the Democrats spearheaded the deregulation of the industry and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs. The CWA is also exploiting workers’ concerns over the outsourcing of call center jobs to the Philippines and other low-wage countries by encouraging workers to support the US Call Center Worker and Consumer Protection Act. The Democratic Party-backed measure would encourage customers to demand that they speak to call center workers in the US, and is in line with Trump’s scapegoating of foreign workers for “stealing American jobs.”

On picket lines in Pennsylvania, California and New York, rank-and-file workers who spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporting teams expressed support for broadening their fight and waging real struggle against the telecom giants.

In Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Larry, who has been working for AT&T for 22 years in the operations department, said, “We’ve been without a contract since February. They keep on outsourcing jobs. It gives them more profit.” In terms of the three-day strike, “I think we should go a little longer so they realize we are serious. We ought to be working as a group,” he said, referring to other striking workers who have been isolated by the CWA and IBEW bureaucracy.

Another worker interjected saying, “Our health care premiums have already gone up. The union voted it in, but we didn’t vote for it.”

Shelly is a Sales Support Representative and started in 2000. In 2012, she was arbitrarily laid off. She said, “The company did not tell the union they were getting rid of me. I was hired back. I am out here for job security and pay. I need more money. I get 2 percent a year. We should be striking for a longer time.”

Katrina said, “I’m doing more and getting paid less. I took a \$7,000 pay cut last year because of commission. I made \$49,000 this year and I am doing way more. The company can change the commission, which is not in the contract.

“I owe the doctor \$300. The insurance doesn’t cover squat. Then they want us to pay more. We get 10 sick days a year but after six times calling off you are fired. I don’t know how people do it with kids. They probably get fired.”

She also said a serious struggle was needed. “We were just talking about how we should strike for longer. AT&T is greedy. It is time we stood up.”

Cindy talked about the authorized retailers the company is pushing. “They are franchises and sell AT&T phones and services, but they do not have to pay commission, and then they send customers to us and we fix the problem, but don’t get paid for it. Then they have the nerve [AT&T] to put out a quarterly report to show employees what they are not getting. The CEO is making millions and they claim the sales representatives are making \$75,000, which is not true.”

AT&T CEO Randall Stephenson has been showered with money for axing labor costs and enlarging profits. In 2016, he made \$28.4 million, a 13.1 percent raise from the year before.

Cindy continued, “I’m on three different medicines for anxiety; it’s too much stress and pressure. I do text support. We do everything and are forced to take every single call. They watch over you and mark it down. We had 400 some people at a call center and now are down to 126. We can’t use vacation time either.”

Katrina chimed in saying, “They micromanage me. Everything is documented and written up. Those authorized retailers just make the company more money. They don’t have to pay those people and they don’t know how to fix things. If their SIM card is broken, they have to come here to fix it.”

Dave, who has been working at AT&T for 18 years in operations, said, “The company is going in the wrong direction. We get a 2 percent raise a year and then our insurance goes up 3 or 4 percent. AT&T supposedly flew in managers to fill striking positions and they closed a bunch of stores for the strike. Some of the things in sales are ridiculous. We get 10 sick days and we can’t use them or we will get fired.”

“I think it [the strike] should be longer. I wish we had 120,000 workers [out here], but we don’t have the numbers we want to.”

Chuck drove to the picket line from Hershey as a member of Local 465, Chocolate Workers, saying, “I’m here in solidarity to support the AT&T workers. They are fighting for better pay, better insurance. The company wants to make them pay more and give them less of a raise. How much is too much? I don’t want to be greedy, but if you make employees happy they do better work.”

About a dozen workers at AT&T’s store in Culver City, an enclave of Los Angeles, were on the picket line Saturday. The striking retail sales consultants explained that they were striking for better wages and health benefits, fairer commission rates and reasonable quotas.

The workers expressed their frustration with how their commission rates have been continually reduced over the last few years. Juan explained how they must sell many different products such as alarm systems, DIRECTTV satellite service, wireless internet and streaming services. “For us to earn a livable wage, we have to double our quota, which corporate

keeps raising, and if we are able to do that we are then taxed at 40 percent.”

Aaron pointed out how they all have “to work twice as hard to earn income from commissions, and end up earning less than half of what we used to earn.”

Terrell pointed out that “the money AT&T has spent to acquire DIRECTV [\$48.5 billion] and their \$85 billion offer for Time Warner is money that should have been used for us workers. Instead they have lowered our commissions consistently in the past few years and they now want to raise our health care costs.”

As for the scapegoating of foreign workers for the loss of jobs that is being carried out by both the company and the CWA, a WWSWS reporter emphasized the need to unite all workers globally to fight the profit system, which is the real source of the problem. In response Terrell described what might be termed as domestic outsourcing. “AT&T Corporate stores are closing and re-opening as authorized retailers so they can pay those employees a lot less than us.”

The AT&T store being picketed was still open and staffed by managers from this and other stores. The pickets, however, believed that many of these managers were supportive of their efforts, particularly because AT&T had laid off almost 50 percent of all managers nationwide during the last year.

In New York City, Dennis, a sales agent who works in Manhattan, said, “It is horrific that a company that makes so much money can’t pay us better wages and lower health care premiums. We sweat bullets for them and the CEO took in \$28 million last year. This is at a time when rent is going up and life is getting harder for working people in New York City.”

Another striker picketing at the AT&T store on 34th Street told the WWSWS, “Maybe on Monday we should decide not to go back to work if there is no change from AT&T.” He added that he felt that the Verizon workers and the AT&T workers’ struggles should not have been separated.



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