

AT&T West workers reject deal pushed by Communications Workers of America

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On July 6, some 17,000 AT&T West workers in California and Nevada rejected a proposed contract brought back by the Communications Workers of America (CWA) by 53 percent. The proposal included a meager wage increase of 11 percent over four years, which would be more than offset by an increase in employees' share of health care premiums, which would rise to 29 percent by 2020, and other concessions.

After the defeat of the sellout agreement, the CWA immediately agreed to federally mediated talks, an information blackout and ban on any strikes until mediation is completed. The CWA fears a rebellion by rank-and-file workers who it has forced to remain on the job for more than a year after the April 2016 expiration of their labor agreement.

AT&T, the world's largest telecom, has refused to back down on its concession demands even as it raked in \$13 billion in profits in 2016 and is currently involved in an \$85 billion merger with Time Warner. CEO Randall Stephenson pocketed \$28.4 million in 2016, 500 times that of an AT&T employee.

The CWA-backed deal would force workers to pay for vision and dental care for the first time. The deal would not restore six months of retroactive pay for 2016—from a raise that workers should already have received—which means the ostensible three percent annual wage would dwindle to 1.5 percent. The CWA has also agreed to the creation of another lower tier of workers, with new hires paying more for health care, receiving reduced short-term disability and with only five days of sick time.

Workers will continue to be punished if customers call for a repeat visit, which is primarily due to the system's decaying infrastructure. The company is also shifting work from higher-paid "core splicers" and to

technicians who earn 30 percent less.

With tensions rising against AT&T and the CWA around the country, the CWA called a largely bogus three-day strike in May involving 40,000 workers at AT&T Mobility in 36 states and Washington, D.C., as well as workers at AT&T West, AT&T East (Connecticut) and DIRECTV (California and Nevada). The "strike" occurred while most workers were off work anyway for the weekend. Meanwhile, the CWA and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) has isolated the more than three-month strike by 1,800 workers at Spectrum (formerly Time Warner Cable) in New York City and Bergen County, New Jersey.

Trying to maintain credibility, CWA Local 9509 officials in San Diego called for a "No" vote on the AT&T West tentative agreement, while praising the CWA bargaining team for reaching the "best deal" it could. Last year, as AT&T West workers were chafing to join 38,000 striking Verizon workers in a common fight against the telecom giants, the San Diego local union officials called a four-day strike by 1,700 area workers only to shut it down before the walkout spread state-wide.

When details of the contract were first released workers took to social media to denounce the sellout. "After a year of negotiations, the union has the audacity to try and sell us on this ridiculous contract, which they agreed upon," a worker declared on the CWA Local 9509 Facebook page. "We shouldn't have to vote no. Is this union going to get us something or continuously allow AT&T to take and take."

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Workers at AT&T retail stores, call centers, and elsewhere are subjected to harsh working conditions.

Workers are penalized for sick days, if a worker misses eight days out of a year they are fired even though workers are guaranteed ten sick days. Thus, a worker with a family of two children who takes off more than eight days to take care of their family loses his or her job.

The CWA, which is allied with the Democratic Party and promoted the campaign of Bernie Sanders last year, is doing everything in its power to block a united struggle against the telecom giants. During the eight years of the Obama administration, the unions throughout the country reduced strike activity to the lowest level in history, collaborating in the suppression of any opposition to the administration's strategy of keeping wage increases at or below the rate of inflation and shifting health care and pension costs from the employers to workers. The unions are continuing their role in suppressing the class struggle under the rule of the billionaire president Donald Trump.

The rejection of the sellout agreement is a sign of the growing militancy of workers against this government-corporate-union gang up, and the increasing sentiment in the working class for a fight against social inequality. To conduct a genuine fight, rank-and-file workers will have to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the CWA and other pro-company unions and elect committees in every workplace.

AT&T workers must demand an immediate lifting of the news blackout on the talks, which are not negotiations between two opposing parties but a conspiracy against the workers. Rank-and-file committees should establish lines of communication with AT&T workers throughout the country and prepare a real struggle, including strike action in defiance of the union-company ban, and the mobilization of all telecom workers to defend their jobs and living standards.



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