

14,000 AT&T Midwest workers still without a contract

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The Communications Workers of America (CWA) is forcing 14,000 AT&T workers in the midwestern US states to remain on the job more than three weeks after the April 14 expiration of their labor agreement. AT&T, which is still the world's largest telecom company, continues to demand sweeping concessions from workers, regarding health care, pensions and further job cuts.

The CWA is defying the overwhelming strike authorization vote by AT&T Midwest workers who operate in Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin. Workers at AT&T Legacy T who work nationwide are also working without a new contract.

Bargaining reports for both regions indicate that the company has not moved on any of their essential demands despite repeated offers by the union to compromise. On Thursday, AT&T rejected all the union proposals made at bargaining for the Legacy region. The company presented a counter proposal, which was rejected by the union the same day. In a letter to members, the CWA admitted the company has not moved on its demands to cut health care, pension and jobs. "We are making incremental progress but not on priority issues."

Bargaining reports for the AT&T Midwest region state that the company and the union have reached agreement on many side issues, but not the major ones. "This movement though, is not enough to say that we are near agreement on any of these issues, such as; wages, benefits, job security and moving more work into the bargaining unit."

AT&T has cut over 13,000 jobs just from its Midwest region in the past decade. In 2009, the CWA covered 20,000 workers in the region, today that number has been cut to just 7,000 workers.

For workers in the AT&T Legacy region previous

concessions by the union have allowed the company to push health care costs onto the backs of workers. Since 2013, workers have seen their premiums more than triple, forcing many workers to forego buying insurance.

The company is demanding workers pay a third of the total cost of health care. At the current cost, this would amount to about \$6,000 per year. For the average worker making \$50,000 a year, this amounts to a 12 percent pay cut.

AT&T has also closed 44 call centers since 2011, including 8 in California, 5 in Texas, 2 in Michigan and 2 in Ohio. This has resulted in cutting 16,000 jobs.

In response to the company's moves to shift production to lower-cost countries, the CWA has promoted nationalism, echoing Trump's "America First" campaign against workers in Mexico, the Philippines, El Salvador and other countries.

A CWA report, titled, "AT&T 2018 JOBS REPORT—Telecom Giant Hollows Out Middle Class Workforce and Outsources to Global Contractors, Even as it Reaps Tax Windfall" the union repeatedly calls upon AT&T to be "good corporate citizen" and to keep "good, family-supporting jobs."

Far from uniting workers in the United States with workers throughout the world in a battle against the global telecom giants, the union seeks to pit workers of different countries against each other and to use this as another excuse to push through further concessions and layoffs of its members. At the same time, the CWA has close relations with 2016 Democratic primary candidate Bernie Sanders who provides a "left" cover for the unions and the corporate-controlled Democratic Party.

The CWA has agreed to deep concessions in health care, pensions and jobs in exchange for AT&T agreeing to allow the union to collect dues from low-paid

wireless workers AT&T and Verizon. The CWA claimed that once the wireless workers were organized the union would be stronger and could win better contracts including restoring of past concessions.

However, the CWA continues to enforce concession after concession. AT&T only agreed to the CWA organizing wireless workers because they recognize the union as a trusted partner in driving down wages, destroying jobs, boosting productivity while keeping workers strike actions to a minimum.

Over the past year, the CWA has again worked to keep their members divided and have signed concessions contracts at all five of AT&T other regions, including for the nearly 50,000 wireless workers they represent. It also called off a three-week strike by Frontier workers (formerly Verizon) in West Virginia after keeping those workers isolated and without winning any of their demands. Workers at Verizon are still seeing their jobs cuts despite claims by the CWA that the deal it signed in 2016, after selling out the six-week strike by 40,000 workers, had won “job security.”

The anger among AT&T workers and the 90 percent vote to strike is part of a growing movement of the working class, particularly teachers who have struck in West Virginia, Oklahoma and most recently Arizona, demanding better pay, health care and increased funding for education. In those struggles, the unions were also the chief obstacles to a broader mobilization of the working class.

Having seen the rebellion of rank-and-file teachers, the CWA wants to do everything to prevent telecom workers from breaking free from the union’s control. That is why the prerequisite of any fight to defend jobs and living standards, will require the formation of rank-and-file workplace committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the CWA and other unions.



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