

AT&T Midwest workers press for strike action as CWA seeks to block struggle

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More than five weeks after the expiration of their contract with AT&T, telecom workers in the Midwestern US states are pressing for strike action. The Communications Workers of America (CWA) has forced 7,000 workers in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin to remain on the job while the world's largest telecom demands sweeping concessions involving health care benefits, pensions and the contracting out of work.

The contract covering workers at AT&T West, along with another 7,000 workers at AT&T Legacy T operations across the US, expired on April 14.

Several hundred workers walked off the job Thursday and Friday at suburban Detroit AT&T facilities in Southfield and Royal Oak, Michigan. The CWA described the limited action as an "unfair labor relations" strike, which was not connected to the new contract. Well aware that workers are ready and willing to battle the corporation, the CWA called the action to allow workers to let off steam and reassert authority over the restive workers. Meanwhile, the CWA is keeping the majority of the workforce on the job without a contract while it colludes with management behind the scenes to push through another concessionary contract.

The CWA has employed such maneuvers before, including in 2016, when the union called a local grievance strike in San Diego while it kept 14,000 AT&T West employees whose contract had expired on the job in California and Nevada, preventing solidarity action with 40,000 Verizon workers striking on the East Coast. In 2017, the CWA called a bogus "weekend" strike by 40,000 workers at AT&T and AT&T Mobility in dozens of states before cutting a deal, which the CWA called a "victory" for supposedly protecting jobs. The year 2018 began, however, with AT&T and other telecoms announcing a new wave of layoffs.

As the Midwest deadline passed, the CWA acknowledged, "We have made no progress on any of your key issues thanks to the Company's ongoing retrogressive proposals." AT&T, it said, "continues to insist on more cost shifting to the members with regards to healthcare, freezing and eliminating pensions, and other retrogressive demands that would dismantle decades of collective bargaining gains." In the latest bargaining report, issued May 18, the CWA reiterated that AT&T negotiators are "still maintaining their positions of high health care costs, less employment, and weaker job security."

There is growing discontent among rank-and-file workers over the endless stalling by the CWA and enormous anger at the corporation, which made \$21 billion in profits in 2017 and expects

an even greater windfall this year due to Trump's corporate tax cuts. While squandering billions on dividend payments, stock buybacks and the planned merger with Time Warner, the company, with the assistance of the CWA, is conducting a ruthless downsizing and cost-cutting campaign.

"This is about protecting our pensions and job security and stopping the company from contracting out our work," Tony, a veteran lineman who works in Flint, Michigan, told the *WSWS Telecom Worker Newsletter*. "When I first hired in we had 26 guys on our crew, now there are four. In Flint there are 150-200 guys. Now there are a total of 50. There are also more dangers of injury because they want you to work harder and hurry up."

Referring to the unions, he continued, "The upper management in the CWA leaves us on our own. We feel isolated. Every contract we give up so much whether it is health care benefits or pay raises. Whatever bonuses we get to ratify a contract are eaten up by higher out-of-pocket medical costs," Tony said.

Addressing the broader issues confronting the working class, he said, "The company and the government want to divide and conquer workers. If we came together in a general strike, they couldn't ignore us." Pointing to the ongoing water crisis in Flint, Tony said, "They are forcing residents to pay top dollar for poisoned water. If it keeps going like it's going, with all the cutbacks to workers, and now Trump talking about getting rid of child labor laws, we're going to have a revolution in this country."

Telecom workers spoke to the *WSWS Telecom Worker Newsletter* at a downtown Detroit rally organized by the CWA on Saturday, May 19. In a vote of no confidence in the union, workers largely boycotted the event, which was attended by about 200 workers.

"A lot of workers are saying why should I get behind the union if it doesn't have my interests in mind?" Francis, a veteran AT&T worker in Detroit told the newsletter. "They're saying the union has probably already done a deal with the company and all of this is just for show."

Another worker from Metro Detroit who said she had been categorized as "surplus" and targeted for elimination, declared, "People are getting tired and they're saying we're not going to wait for the union anymore. We have to do this ourselves."

The rally highlighted the reactionary character of the CWA and its anti-working-class politics. Union executives handed over the platform to Democratic Party politicians, including US Congresswoman Debbie Dingell and gubernatorial candidate

Gretchen Whitmer, the former Michigan state senate minority leader endorsed by the Democratic Party establishment, the Michigan AFL-CIO, the United Auto Workers and other unions.

The Democratic politicians made worthless promises to back workers while concealing the party's role in collaborating with the Republicans in the decades-long, bipartisan war against the working class. "There are high stakes in these elections," Whitmer declared, stumping for votes. "It's not just another day in November—it's for your lives and livelihoods," she claimed.

Speakers from the CWA, including national union president Chris Shelton, espoused economic nationalism, echoing the anti-foreigner racism peddled by Donald Trump. "AT&T CEO Randal Stephenson said he would create jobs with the corporate tax cuts," Shelton declared, "but he's hiring them in Mexico, the Philippines, India and El Salvador. Put jobs back in the Midwest."

Rick Blocker, the Metro Detroit AFL-CIO president, was even filthier. "When I call up as an AT&T customer for assistance I get someone on the line who tries to talk to me about Detroit sports teams, I say, 'You're not from America. Get off the line.'"

The unions have long peddled this nationalist poison to shift the blame for job cutting and other attacks from the corporations to workers in other countries and thereby block any unified struggle by workers around the world against the global corporations. At the same time, the unions have agreed to decades of wage and benefit cuts in order to convince corporations to "in-source" jobs to the US. In this way, the CWA can collect dues from poverty-stricken workers and maintain the lavish salaries of union executives like Shelton who made \$215,000 last year, plus perks.

CWA District 4 Vice President Linda Hinton made it clear that the union's slogan, "No jobs, no deal," was a cover for yet another concessions contract. "We used to have 10,000 jobs in the Midwest. It doesn't do anyone any good to have good wages and health care but no jobs. We're holding Randall to his word to create new jobs."

CWA President Shelton complained that he had been forced to leave his Washington, DC, offices to come to a rally with so few workers. "I want you to go back to work Monday," he instructed the audience, to "convince other members" to back the CWA and the bargaining committee. "If I'm going to be summoned down here again, you tell those god damned people to get off their lazy asses and come down here."

After the rally, many workers spoke with the WWSWS and expressed support for the Socialist Equality Party's call for the election of rank-and-file workplace committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the CWA, and unite with teachers, autoworkers and other sections of workers in a common fight.

John, who works in the Pontiac area, said, "The corporate leaders don't want infrastructure any more, all they want is media content and that's why they're doing the Time Warner merger. At the same time, they're contracting out our jobs and forcing higher-paid workers out with arbitrary disciplinary measures. There were three guys with over 25 years suspended at my location."

"They don't want the core workers who built this company," added Derrick, a veteran worker nearing retirement. Their aim is to reduce labor costs and sell off or contract out much of their

business. All they want with the Time Warner merger is the content and the cloud data storage because that's not labor-intensive."

A young worker told the WWSWS, "The pay differential between the older and new workers is as much as \$20 an hour and a lot more with benefits. They're starting workers at \$13.70 going up to \$24 after five years, while the legacy workers make \$42 an hour. The company is slowly adding more work on to us instead of giving the jobs to higher-paid workers in order to push them out."

Gabby, the daughter of an AT&T worker, who is deaf, told the WWSWS, "My dad's health care provides the money for my cochlear implants. So, if my dad were to lose his job, I'll lose my hearing."

Her father Tony, from Anderson, Indiana, has worked for AT&T for 20 years as a splicer. "Her implants cost about \$22,000 dollars for both. When you get into the batteries and ear hooks that have to be replaced, we have to pay that out of pocket. Right now, she's due for two batteries, which are about \$600, and two ear hooks, which are \$450."

Nicole has worked for AT&T for 10 years and is now in a so-called Retention Center. "Because of the failing economy, people don't have as much money, so a lot of customers want to reduce costs. My job is to retain them, and I have to sell to them, too! I don't get the full pay someone who started 25 years ago does. In one year, my salary dropped by almost \$20,000 because the company changed its metrics, and we were expected to meet different goals."

Nicole added, "I am following the teachers' strikes. They deserve to be paid more. A lot of companies are taking away from the poor and the middle class and giving it to corporate America, so they can have jets and luxury housing. It's hard for us to even take a vacation when you've got a family to support!"

Francis, another veteran worker from Detroit, also commented on the teacher strikes. "Every state should rise up and demand better working conditions. It shouldn't be only the rich whose kids get the best of everything. If we're putting all our money into health care expenses, paying for child care, or if you're working two or three different jobs, then you can't take care of your kids and they end up having problems or going to prison."

"I'm borderline retirement, and my kids are grown. But what about the future? We're not going to stand by and watch these corporate giants crush those that got them there. It's always about the money, like the way they threw Detroit into bankruptcy so the rich could gain. These corporations are monsters and what happens to us here is going to have a big impact on all workers."



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