CWA continues token strikes at AT&T Midwest—workers demand decisive struggle

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The Communications Workers of America (CWA) is continuing a series of "unfair labor relations" strikes at AT&T work locations in the US Midwest as talks continue without progress for 14,000 wireline workers at AT&T Midwest and Legacy T operations.

The CWA has refused to call a system-wide strike as it attempts to diffuse worker anger and militancy through a series of isolated and disjointed actions. Workers are opposing a slew of concession demands from management in health care as well as continued job cuts. In the current talks, while the CWA has claimed progress on secondary matters, it reports no resolution of key issues such as wages, benefits and job security.

Workers registered a 90 percent strike authorization vote in April. However, the union ordered workers to stay on the job when the contract expired April 14. AT&T Midwest covers workers in Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin. AT&T Legacy T workers are employed nationwide.

The local walkouts involve workers in Milwaukee, the Detroit area, Dayton and Youngstown, Ohio, and other locations. However, some AT&T workers have been ordered to stay on the job in a deliberate bid by the CWA to undermine the unity and effectiveness of the action.

Local CWA officials told the media that the strikes were called not to protest the company's intransigent bargaining stance, but against attempts by management to contact workers directly over terms of the AT&T proposal, bypassing the union. The CWA has maintained a virtual blackout on negotiations. The union clearly fears that management, by informing AT&T workers of its provocative demands, may undermine the union's ability to contain rank-and-file anger over concessions.

In an e-mail statement, AT&T spokesperson Marty Richer wrote, "After over 10 weeks of negotiations, we presented the union with a final offer with a goal of bringing this process to a close and reaching fair agreement for our employees. After we presented terms to the union at the bargaining table, we communicated them to our employees, as permitted by law."

World Socialist Web Site Telecom Newsletter reporters spoke with workers picketing an AT&T location in Southfield, Michigan in suburban Detroit. Workers said they were very concerned about job losses and outsourcing, including call center jobs. Workers noted that 11 call centers previously located in Michigan have been closed over the past 20 years and none now remain. Workers indicated they had not been given any details of talks with the unions.

At this point CWA officials interrupted the discussion and asked workers not to speak further with WSWS reporters, loudly insisting all information had to come from the union. The reporters pointed out that the *Telecom Newsletter* was attempting to mobilize other sections of workers behind the AT&T workers, while the role of the CWA was to isolate the strike. They pointed out to workers the treacherous role of the CWA in the six-week 2016 Verizon strike, where the union declared a victory, but workers ended up saddled with higher health care costs.

At a May 19 rally organized by the CWA in downtown Detroit, workers expressed distrust of the union and support for a broader struggle. One worker said, "People are getting tired and they're saying we're not going to wait for the union anymore. We have to do this ourselves."

Workers at both AT&T Midwest and Legacy T have faced huge attacks on their health care, with out-of-pocket costs soaring. There is no indication that

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management has budged from demands, which include that workers pay one-third of total health care costs. For a typical worker, this comes to some $6,000 a year, or a 12 percent pay cut. Since 2013 workers have seen their premiums more than triple, forcing some to forgo health insurance.

This comes as AT&T is continuing its program of job cuts. In the Midwest region it has slashed 13,000 jobs since 2009, leaving just 7,000 workers in the bargaining unit. AT&T has closed 44 call centers since 2011. The last call center in Detroit closed earlier this year. The company dismissed 600 workers in the Midwest at the start of 2018 and 700 workers in Texas and Missouri. Most of the layoffs were in its landline and "legacy" sectors.

The tactic of calling isolated protest strikes has been honed by the CWA over the years as a means of letting off steam while it maneuvers to impose a contract betrayal. This has gone hand-in-hand with whipping up nationalist antagonism against workers in other countries such as Mexico and the Philippines where AT&T has expanded operations.

The divide and conquer strategy of the CWA has included the signing of concessions contracts at the five other regions covered by AT&T. This has included 50,000 wireless workers. It called off a strike by workers at Frontier in West Virginia and parts of Virginia without winning any of the workers' demands.

In 2017 the CWA called a phony "weekend" strike by 40,000 AT&T and AT&T Mobility workers in dozens of states before announcing a contract settlement that supposedly defended jobs. However, AT&T, along with other telecom companies, announced a new wave of layoffs at the start of 2018.

The CWA, along with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, betrayed the strike by 1,800 Spectrum workers in New York and New Jersey. The workers, now in the second year of their action, were hung out to dry by the CWA and IBEW, which left workers isolated on the picket line while the company continued its operations unhindered.

In the case of the strike by 40,000 Verizon workers in 2016, the CWA abruptly called off the strike and organized a vote on a concessionary contract that it palmed off as a "victory." Workers at Verizon are still facing job cuts despite the fact that the CWA claimed the agreement would preserve "job security."

The fight by AT&T telecom workers is part of a growing movement of workers in the US and internationally that is taking more and more the character of a rebellion against the pro-capitalist trade unions. The *WSWS Telecom Newsletter* urges AT&T workers to take the struggle out of the hands of the CWA by organizing rank-and-file workplace committees. These committees should forge links with telecom workers nationally and internationally, as well as other sections of workers, such as autoworkers and teachers, in a common fight.

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