

20,000 AT&T workers strike as GM, Ford and Chrysler contract deadline looms

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On Friday night at midnight, over 20,000 workers in Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee walked off the job at AT&T.

The strike broke out with little advanced notice as the trade union, the Communications Workers of America (CWA), sought to force workers to stay on the job three weeks past the contract expiration on August 3. A Thursday statement from CWA admitted mass worker anger: “The phones at the District 3 Office have not stop ringing today [sic]. Members are calling to say that they want a new contract.”

The largest strike in the American South in recent history captures a growing mood of militancy among workers worldwide. Images of black and white workers manning pickets together in the deep south send an important message: The unity of the international working class—no matter the race, gender or nationality—is a strategic necessity in the struggle for social equality.

Workers everywhere are voting by the hundreds of thousands to strike. Over 150,000 autoworkers are holding strike authorization votes across Texas, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Tennessee, New York, Kansas and Missouri, with initial results showing over 97 percent voting: “strike.”

In July, 60,000 grocery store workers voted to strike in Southern California and over 85,000 healthcare workers voted to strike Kaiser Permanente across California, Oregon, Washington, Colorado, Maryland, Virginia, Hawaii and the District of Columbia. An additional 25,000 Chicago teachers have authorized a strike.

AT&T Inc. is one of the world’s malefactors of great wealth. In its ruthless exploitation of workers and customers and its strangling command of governments and world markets, the corporation epitomizes the rapaciousness of global capitalism.

The corporation is demanding an unprecedented

austerity contract that would pave the way for mass firings and force workers to labor under conditions not seen since the 1920s.

AT&T wants the power to lay off workers regardless of seniority for attendance and performance-related pretenses. It seeks to implement a mandatory, 24/7 standby program where workers will be called to work on irregular schedules with little notice, resembling the “shape-up” system of the early 20th century. Wire technicians would be forced to work more complex and dangerous jobs with no pay increase, call center workers would be monitored with every breathe they take, and the corporation is reportedly demanding workers pay more for healthcare.

The corporation’s 2018 gross profit was \$91.3 billion, each dollar stolen through the exploitation of its labor force. The corporation controls 34 percent of US wireless subscriptions. The domination of the US mobile phone market by only a handful of companies means that Americans pay the highest prices anywhere in the world for mobile data, according to a study published last year.

AT&T exists to funnel billions into the pockets of its aristocratic shareholders, with dividends per share increasing from under \$0.50 per share in 1994 to nearly \$2.00 per share today. The corporation spent \$693 million on share buybacks in 2017 alone. Its CEO, Randall Stephenson, made \$29 million in 2018.

Like the robber barons of the gilded age, AT&T dominates the government, owns the politicians and writes the rules governing its own “regulation.”

According to Opensecrets.org, the corporation contributed \$11.8 million to candidates in the 2016 election campaign, including \$1.5 million to pay for the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia and \$4.2 million for the Republican National Convention in Cleveland.

All part of the cost of doing business. Earlier this year, a

federal appeals court ruled that AT&T's purchase of Time Warner did not violate anti-trust law. Corporate tax cuts implemented by Donald Trump in 2017 netted the corporation \$3 billion in annual tax savings, in perpetuity. Since the tax cuts went into effect, AT&T has laid off nearly 25,000 workers.

The CWA is effectively part of the corporation. The union leaders are paid like corporate management, living comfortably in the wealthiest 5 or 10 percent. CWA's general counsel, for example, made \$481,000 in 2016 while President Chris Sheldon netted over \$200,000 in 2018. Twenty more union executives earned above \$150,000, enriching themselves off of workers' dues money.

According to federal filings with the Department of Labor, the CWA had assets totaling \$561.4 million in 2018, including \$481.7 million in "investments," including tens of millions in index funds managed by Vanguard, Loomis Sayles, Alliance Bernstein and Paladin Capital.

It is likely that these mutual funds include investments in AT&T stock, meaning the CWA executives stand to lose money in case of a strike. It is no great mystery why the CWA shut down the 7-week 2016 strike of 40,000 Verizon workers on the East Coast and forced through a sell-out contract.

The CWA and AT&T have spent the last several months conspiring with one another against the workers to ensure corporate profitability and expand the CWA's cut. CWA District 3's own "bargaining updates" to the members tell the following pathetic story:

- July 31: "The company said they hear us loud and clear on our issues ... They have told us that they are working on a package of proposals that will address our needs. We are hopeful..."

- August 3: "With less than 24 hours before contract expiration, we expect the company to move to our direction..."

- Later on August 3: CWA District 3 Vice President Richard Honeycutt (2016 salary: \$178,915) told the press, "Extending the current contract in the Southeast allows CWA members to work without interruption..."

- August 15: "The team ... presented the company a package, which they seem elated to receive. We are patiently awaiting their response, with the expectation they accept our admirable package."

- August 17: "We have entertained numerous company proposals with great trepidation."

"Trepidation," defined as "a feeling of fear or agitation

that something may happen," is the appropriate word to describe the feeling with which the trade unions, the corporations, the capitalist political parties and all the world's governments view the prospect of workers opposing the demands of the corporations. Last week, global stock markets were rattled in part by the specter of "social unrest," with investors bemoaning ongoing mass demonstrations in Hong Kong.

So far this year, mass demonstrations involving tens of millions of people have taken place in countries both rich and poor across almost all continents.

In terms of language, religion and race, the throngs of demonstrators that filled the streets of Sudan, Puerto Rico, France, Algeria, Hong Kong, Honduras, Nicaragua and Brazil may not appear to have much in common. But in reality, these workers and youth are the early battalions in an emerging, unified world movement of the working class against social inequality.

The strategy of the ruling class in response to this movement is multi-fold: keep the working class tied to the trade unions, divide the working class against itself by any means necessary and prepare for massive physical suppression of strikes and social protest.

In the United States, Trump follows this strategy by scapegoating immigrant workers for America's social ills, putting forward the fascist lie that workers of impoverished countries destroyed by US imperialism are to blame for inequality and poverty in the US.

The Democratic Party and Democratic-linked media like the *New York Times* adopt a similar strategy, fanning racial and gender divisions with equal obsession and asserting that American history can only be explained by the inherent racism of what the *Times* calls the "white working class."

The strategy of the working class must be to break with the nationalist trade unions and to construct their own, independent organs of social struggle—rank-and-file committees. The chief aim of these new fighting organizations will be to take control of and expand their struggles and secure the unity of the international working class for a common offensive on the commanding heights of the capitalist economic order.



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