

AT&T strikers show their power, but face union-company gang-up

Samuel Davidson and Patrick Martin
27 August 2019

Years of pent up anger at AT&T exploded this weekend as 22,000 workers in nine southern states went on strike against the telecommunications giant. But officials of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) are preparing to call off the powerful strike as soon as the company agrees to new negotiations, without a new contract or even an offer to meet the demands by the workers on jobs, living standards and working conditions.

AT&T workers in Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee walked off the job Friday night at midnight joining AT&T workers from South Florida who went on strike on Thursday morning. On Monday, workers set up picket lines at AT&T locations throughout the region and expressed their anger at the company and their determination to defend their jobs and living standards.

Workers at what is currently called AT&T Southeast, once Bell South, have been working without a contract since August 3, when their previous agreement expired. The rank-and-file voted by over 95 percent to strike, but the CWA ordered their members to continue working until Thursday's action apparently forced their hand.

The strike has been provoked by a savage and continuous assault by AT&T against workers' jobs and living standards. The company has cut the work force nearly in half, while demanding that the remaining workers do twice the work, in the process creating unsafe conditions on the job.

At the same time, AT&T has effectively been cutting wages as inflation eats up the small pay increases granted, and workers are forced to pay larger and larger contributions to cover health care costs.

In the current set of negotiations, AT&T is demanding greater ability to fire workers for attendance and for not meeting production quotas. The company is also seeking a system where workers can be called out at almost any time and with little notice; eliminating many work rules and job classifications for technicians; increased monitoring of call center workers to boost production and increase disciplinary actions. In the current negotiations, the company is offering no pay raise while demanding that workers pay more for health care.

In the leadup to the contract deadline, the CWA leadership sought to ensure that the AT&T Southeast workers would be as isolated as possible. Over the past few months, the CWA leadership has signed concession contracts covering 14,000 workers at AT&T Midwest and AT&T Legacy bargaining units. Those workers had been working without a contract for more than a year.

It's not clear if the CWA national leadership had approved the Thursday action by workers in South Florida or not. But once it happened, they clearly sought to call the regional strike to try and get

out in front of the workers if only better to bring it to an end.

In a bid to contain the strike, CWA officials are claiming that it is over "unfair labor practices," that is, a refusal by AT&T to bargain, rather than to oppose AT&T's draconian demands and press those raised by the workers. This serves two purposes.

First, the CWA can call off the strike at any time, simply by claiming that the company is now bargaining in good faith. There may be no new offer, let alone a contract for workers to vote on, but the union would instruct the workers to abandon their main weapon, a work stoppage that is having a serious impact on the company.

Secondly, by calling the strike over "unfair labor practices," the CWA doesn't have to make public any of its demands. The union doesn't want to set any expectations for its members and seeks to make it easier to describe concessions given to the company as a "victory."

The workers have loudly expressed their demands for higher pay, secure health care and pension benefits, and an end to the crushing pressure of arbitrary discipline and dangerous productivity demands.

David, a wire technician in Miami who has worked at AT&T for five and a half years, explained, "I use this job to support my family. Pay is always everyone's number one thing, but for me the insurance is more important. They can give you pay raises left and right, a dollar here and there, but on the flip side, when they raise the price of insurance then that doesn't help us. Last contract, we got a couple dollars, but our insurance went up \$60, so what does that really do for us?"

Many workers complained about the long hours they have been forced to work since the company cut almost 1,000 technician jobs in the past year, claiming it did not have the need for these employees. As John explained, "They went ahead and fired 165 technicians in the state of Florida who were tenured employees with 24+ years of service. Then they're telling us we have to come in on weekends and work overtime. They're trying to appease Wall Street at the expense of the men and women who have generated the income for this company."

David further expressed, "The hours are crazy. I have a six-year-old and a seven-month-old. There are times when I go to a customer's house, and I'm there past midnight. And there's no paternity leave here. My wife spent a month and a half in the hospital because my daughter was born early. Everything I had to take off during that time I had to cover myself with a sick day or vacation day. I didn't get paid for it."

Mike, a service technician in Miami, told our reporter, "There are days when I don't see my kids because I leave so early to get home so late."

Alex, another AT&T technician in Miami, said, “AT&T management is only thinking about themselves. They just gave a \$4 million bonus to the man who negotiated the Time Warner deal. And to do that, they’re laying us off, and the ones who are left get stuck doing all of the extra work.”

Tom, an outside plant technician in Miami, said, “We are hard-working people. Some of us risk our lives every day for this company and now they’re trying to cut down on our benefits and they’re also firing a whole lot of people. They’re trying to contract out the work some of the technicians do. Instead of having in-house employees they’re trying to contract the work out to not pay benefits.”

On the picket line in Nashville, Tennessee, workers said they had been told by union officials they could not discuss other issues because the strike was over unfair labor practices. But several spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the deep class division between the rank-and-file workers, struggling to survive from day to day, and the corporate elite.

Jessica has worked for AT&T for 15 years and said, “We can’t get them to the bargaining table to even work with us.” She added that the reason the company won’t bargain is “because all the money is going to the top.” The last raise was last year about this time and amounted to only a two percent “cost-of-living” raise, she said.

Jennifer marked 27 years working for AT&T on Monday, and her mother worked at AT&T before her. Asked why she thought AT&T won’t bargain, Jennifer said, “Just as my co-worker said, they want to keep everything in-house at the top instead of for the frontline employees.”

Renee is another second-generation AT&T employee, with 20 years at the company, following her mother, who was on strike in 1983. “My mother participated in the strike of ’83 and I remember how bad those three weeks were, having to get boxes of food and having to live off of little or nothing, and that was back in the ’80s,” Renee recalled.

In 2011, the CWA applied the same “unfair labor practices” game at Verizon. After two weeks on strike, the CWA ordered their members to return to work without a contract. Workers had to work nearly a year without a contract and were forced to accept a deal with concessions and job cuts. During that time Verizon terrorized the workforce, including firing dozens of workers for so-called picket-line violations. Many never got their jobs back.

Eight years on, however, there is great nervousness in the US ruling elite and among their servants in the union hierarchy over whether the unions can continue to keep the lid on the sleeping giant that is the American working class. They are all well aware of the impending September 14 deadline for the national autoworkers contracts with GM, Ford and Fiat-Chrysler, massive strike votes by more than 150,000 grocery and Kaiser Permanente health care workers on the West Coast, as well as simmering tensions in dozens of school districts as the new school year approaches.

For that reason, the national media has downplayed the AT&T strike, with the television networks and the leading dailies, like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, largely ignoring it. This is not an oversight. Both the *Times* and the *Post* seek to portray the working class in general and the workers in the South in particular as backward, racist, and chauvinist. The AT&T picket lines, with workers of all colors, genders and national origins waging a united fight, make a mockery of such lies.

The CWA brought Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders to visit pickets in Louisville, Kentucky, on Monday to help provide political cover for the union leaders’ preparations to call off

the strike. Sanders declared his solidarity with the workers, attacked AT&T executives for their greed and echoed the CWA’s nationalist denunciations of AT&T for transferring call centers to other countries. Then he went on to say, “I call on the management of AT&T to go back to the negotiating table and bargain in good faith with your employees.”

Sanders played a similar role during the 2016 Verizon strike. During the primaries, the CWA endorsed Sanders and he in turn appeared at a few of their rallies to provide union officials with a left cover while they worked to isolate and betray the strike.

Earlier this year, Sanders publicly backed the Wabtec strikers in Erie, Pennsylvania, giving the United Electrical workers union political cover while they were selling out the struggle. The UE paid Sanders back on Monday, as the national union, meeting in convention in Pittsburgh, endorsed his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Meanwhile the CWA is vigorously policing social media pages linked to the union, leading to widespread complaints by workers about the removal of critical comments and other forms of censorship. Among the complaints that came through despite this “curating” were reports that 900 workers were laid off in Greensboro, North Carolina, but not a single union representative among them (“Imagine that,” the poster remarked sarcastically).

There are also messages of solidarity from AT&T workers and CWA members in other parts of the United States outside the nine states affected by the strike. “Techs in SoCal 9400 stand with you, we should be next due to all the layoffs and broken promises,” one worker wrote.

One worker warned that the unfair labor practices strike was unlikely to last a week. “The union has no power,” he said. “AT&T owns the CWA.”

And a retired worker noted that the Democrats attacked the workers just as much as the Republicans. “Let’s not forget that we lost the most under Obama,” she wrote. “Family insurance paid by employer 100%, orthodontist, short term disability, and so much more. We lost thousands of dollars a year under Obama. The wages moved up by pennies.”

Another worker wrote of Sanders’ visit to the picket line in Louisville: “It will be the last time you see him. He did the same thing 2016 for the Verizon Strike. We walked the day before the NY Primary & after the primary Bernie was never seen again.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact