Vote “No” on the CWA’s sellout contract with AT&T!

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On Friday, August 30, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and global telecom giant AT&T announced a tentative agreement in a contract covering 22,000 AT&T workers across nine southeastern states.

The agreement follows the largest strike in the American South in decades, one which started with wildcat actions by AT&T workers in Miami. Eager to head off a mass movement of its members, the CWA filed a National Labor Relations Board complaint and started pickets on the limited basis of opposing AT&T’s alleged “bad faith” bargaining practices.

AT&T employees had been working without a contract for three weeks before the walkout began on August 23. Although workers on picket lines throughout the southeast reported they were striking to demand better pay, improved working conditions, and fair benefits, the CWA limited the strike’s complaints to “bad faith bargaining.” This, as the *World Socialist Web Site* warned, allowed the CWA to end the strike after less than one week when AT&T sent “a decision-maker” to the bargaining table.

The CWA sent workers off their pickets without a contract agreement and without providing workers with any details about a possible agreement.

Now, the CWA is seeking to force workers to accept a concessions contract that will ensure greater profits for the company and its investors and more suffering for AT&T workers.

In keeping with what is now standard practice in winding down a “Hollywood strike,” the CWA has not released the entire contract for its members to review. Instead, an eleven-page “highlights” document lays out the sacrifices that the CWA has agreed workers will accept. The tentative agreement ignores every demand made by AT&T workers throughout the course of the strike and serves to expand the CWA’s dues base by keeping some call center jobs in the United States.

The CWA agreed to a five-year contract. In general, union contracts expire every two years; however, the CWA recently made a similar concession to AT&T in the Midwest, where workers are now bound to a four-year contract. The CWA is thus attempting to stagger the contract expirations of the Midwest and southeast in order to diminish the possibility of simultaneous strikes in these regions.

The CWA boasts of the 13.25 percent pay raise in the tentative agreement, although this amounts to less than three percent annually and it is does not include second tier workers. Moreover, the pay raises agreed to by AT&T are offset by the increasing contributions workers and their spouses will be forced to make to their health insurance policies.

For family health insurance plans, premiums will increase by more than $100 over the five-year contract, while spouses who have access to health insurance from a third party will be required to pay more than $100 per year into AT&T’s insurance plan.

Health insurance deductibles will also increase across the board for both medical services and prescription drugs.

The tentative agreement does not address some of the most important concerns of workers, which include safe working conditions and reasonable working hours. The agreement also keeps in place the much-despised tier system, which divides workers by instituting differential treatment and access to benefits between more recently hired workers and longer term “legacy” workers.

Notably, workers who are hired after ratification would have significantly higher healthcare premiums, giving AT&T an incentive to drive out older workers and replace them with new hires.

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In contrast to the union's posturing that the agreement with AT&T is in the interests of workers, CWA members across the southeast have vocally expressed their dissatisfaction. Members of CWA Local 3122, which covers workers in Miami, Florida, took to the local's Facebook page to express their anger.

One worker commented, "Another sad disappointment by the CWA once again. Not at all surprising."

Another worker declared, "Here's an additional option, if the union doesn't get wire techs a better raise, we could just quit paying dues and give ourselves an additional 1.28% raise per year."

Underscoring the wretched position of wire technicians, one commented, "Still 5 sick days not 10, still not double time after 9 OT hours, insurance still goes up 1% and the best of them all 28 dollars [per hour] after 5 years, etc., which means I'll be here 15 years to make 28 bucks. Come on man I'm not being negative, but nothing has changed."

When union leadership replied stating the worker was wrong about his benefits the worker retorted, "If you think really this was good for us then I guess I've been represented by the wrong people. I don't need any more clarification I need actions that benefit me and my family not more sweet talk and what's on paper at the moment doesn't benefit us at all. And the insurance does go up every year so at the end we'll be making less money than now. This is unbelievable."

Another wire technician complained that a Facebook survey had been removed from local 3122's page, "Why was the survey removed?!?!?!? Did too many wire techs vote No??? If this passes it's a complete fraud!"

Telecom workers' mistrust of the CWA, as well as their angry reaction to the proposed contract, are both entirely justified. In urging the ratification of a concessions contract, the CWA is merely concluding its role through the entire contract struggle as a labor police force, sapping workers' resolve in order to ensure profitability for AT&T and to protect the upper middle-class salaries of union executives.

If the CWA deserved the name "union," if its real aim was the advancement of its members' social position, even in a marginal quantity and within the confines of capitalism, how would this contract fight have looked?

First, all workers in the bargaining unit would have walked out at 12:01 on August 3 when the previous agreement expired. The elementary principle of a workplace struggle—no contract, no work—would have been in place so that workers could begin exercising their leverage from the outset. To do otherwise, as the CWA did, hands initiative to the employer, allowing preparations to be made to weather any possible work stoppage.

Second, no one would have returned to work without a *new contract* . To return to work on any other basis destroys the strike's momentum and demoralizes workers. Finally—and the list could be much longer—a serious struggle would appeal to other workers, including other AT&T workers across the US and internationally as well as auto workers and teachers, to spread strike action to their workplaces in a fight for the basic social rights of the entire working class.

AT&T workers need to draw a balance sheet of this entire experience. In no sense can the CWA be considered a workers' organization. Nor can it be converted into one.

In order to secure their demands, AT&T workers must break from the CWA and form rank-and-file committees that operate independently of the union. The most trusted workers must organize meetings where workers can freely discuss the failure of the tentative agreement and their own set of demands, to include the abolition of the tier-based system, fully funded benefits for all workers and their families, a 40 percent raise and rehiring of fired and laid off employees to meet the work demand.

Instead of appealing to AT&T or the CWA to institute these changes, AT&T workers must appeal to their class brothers and sisters around the world. During the strike, autoworkers, Amazon workers, and teachers throughout the country showed their support for AT&T workers. A social counteroffensive requires a joint strategy based on the common interests of workers across industries and across continents.

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