Over 17,000 AT&T workers strike in the southeast US

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AT&T workers: what are your conditions like, and what are you fighting for in your strike? *Tell us by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.*

Over 17,000 workers employed at AT&T's Southeast division went on strike on August 16. The workers, members in District 3 of the Communication Workers of America (CWA), are picketing throughout the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, the Carolinas, Tennessee, and Kentucky.

The strike was called by the CWA over Unfair Labor Practices (ULP), arguing the company has not bargained in good faith during ongoing contract talks.

The workers in CWA District 3 are part of a national workforce of more than 150,000 CWA members at AT&T. The 17,000 on strike are "technicians, customer service representatives, and others who install, maintain, and support AT&T's residential and business wireline telecommunications network."

Contract bargaining talks between CWA District 3 and AT&T Southeast began on June 25. In his opening remarks to the first bargaining session, district 3 Vice President Richard Honeycutt bemoaned the "quality of life" of AT&T employees, including their wages and job security, having "taken a severe hit" over the years.

However, the CWA bureaucracy bears joint responsibility for this with management. The previous five-year contract, which expired on August 3, went into effect in 2019 after the union shut down a six-day strike by 22,000 AT&T workers in District 3. As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned at the time, "this limitation of the strike to a complaint over 'bad-faith bargaining' paved the way for a quick return to work without a contract or a single substantive issue moving in the workers' favor."

The CWA bureaucracy is no doubt attempting the same maneuver now, preparing to shut down the strike with a concessions contract that it can then market as a "victory" won through strike action.

The five years since the last strike have seen an enormous erosion of workers' standard of living through inflation, job cuts and cuts to social spending. The COVID-19 pandemic broke out only months after the last contract took effect and continues to this day. Meanwhile, trillions of dollars pumped out of wealth created by the working class are being wasted on war, while attacks on workers' democratic rights continues under both parties.

At the same time, workers have sought to take action in defense of their interests, with US strike activity rising between 2020 and 2023. But the chief obstacle has been the union bureaucracy, which is working hand in glove with both management and the White House.

Only days before the CWA strike began, automaker Stellantis announced nearly 2,500 job cuts at its Warren Truck plant, the latest in a massive worldwide jobs-cutting campaign. This was made possible by the new United Auto Workers contract, endorsed by President Biden last year after the union called off a limited "standup strike" that impacted only a handful of plants.

The previous CWA contract contained a "Strike Limitations" clause which stipulated there to be "no lockouts or strikes during the life of this Agreement." Such pro-company conditions were also agreed upon by the union bureaucracy for the previous and current contract of CWA members that work for AT&T's subsidiary, AT&T Mobility.

Meanwhile, AT&T's revenues have averaged around $37 billion since the 2019 strike, and the company has consistently promised its shareholders billions of dollars in "cost-savings" initiatives on the backs of the workers. When Honeycutt declared "[t]he Union,

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through its membership, plays a vital role in the overall success of the Company's operations" can be more fully appreciated, he means the CWA bureaucracy has offered up the members to be exploited.

One of the ways it does this is by splitting up its members among different CWA districts and AT&T divisions, under different contracts with different durations and expiration dates.

The irreconcilable social interests of the union bureaucrats and the rank-and-file membership find their sharpest reflection in the political activity of the former.

The CWA filed almost $20 million in "Political Activities and Lobbying" in its recent report to the US Office of Labor Management, with the leadership being very public in its support for the Democratic Party, one of the twin parties of Wall Street.

The CWA has openly endorsed the Harris-Walz presidential ticket. Union president Claude Cummings Jr., who boasted of joining Biden on his Air Force One plane last month, was one of seven union heads invited to address the Democratic Party's National Convention. This took place simultaneously with the strike, with Cummings heaping praise on Biden, who recently called the AFL-CIO his "domestic NATO," and Harris.

The alternative to the union apparatus-management-government partnership is a movement by rank-and-file members to assert democratic control over their struggle. Workers have taken a courageous stand, but they must not allow their struggle to be limited and sold out by the bureaucracy.

This requires the formation of rank-and-file action committees, acting with the confidence of rank-and-file workers, which assert the authority to countermand any decisions that violate workers' will. Workers must also assert the right to complete control over the bargaining process from top to bottom, rather than accepting whatever one-sided information the CWA officials decide to give them.

A first step should be for AT&T Southeast workers to establish direct lines of communication between pickets, and to arrange a rank-and-file membership meeting to democratically discuss demands and strategize on the way forward.

There is enormous potential to link up with workers all over the country who are engaged in struggles. CWA members at the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* are continuing their strike which has dragged on for almost two years, while video game performers in SAG-AFTRA are currently on strike. At the same time, thousands of Stellantis workers are engaged in struggle against the company's job cuts around the globe, while auto parts workers are striking at a Dakkota plant in Chicago.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is at the service of the rank-and-file membership to assist in these efforts. CWA members should also attend the online public meeting being held by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees on August 25 for global action to defend job cuts at Stellantis, in order to share their experiences with UAW members and begin to link up their struggles with theirs against the multi-billion-dollar conglomerates.

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