

Strike by 17,000 AT&T workers across the southeastern US approaches one month

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AT&T workers, tell us what you're fighting for and what you think the way forward is in your strike by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Some 17,000 AT&T workers across nine southeastern US states are in the fourth week of their strike against the world's third largest telecommunications company. The workers, who are members of Communication Workers of America (CWA) District 3, walked out on August 16, two weeks after their contract expired.

Among those on strike are technicians, customer service representatives and workers who install, maintain and repair telecommunications networks in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee.

Workers have cited scheduling, increased wages and healthcare benefits as the main issues over which they are determined to win significant improvements. While AT&T posted \$122 billion in revenue last year, and paid CEO John Stankey \$25.7 million, the company's employees have to take on second jobs and gig work just to make ends meet.

In the latest development, CWA District 3 officials announced to the membership on September 5 that it was withdrawing from the federal mediation it had agreed to in late August.

The union stated in its AT&T Southeast Bargaining Report that “[It told] the company and the mediator that AT&T was taking advantage of the mediator and abusing the mediation process as a stall tactic. The company used mediation to stop bargaining with us, wasting our time and the mediator's. We withdrew from mediation to get bargaining going again, the way it has to be done: across the table with the company.”

On August 20, in trying to convince its striking Southeastern AT&T about its positive outlook for federal mediation, the union stated, “Yesterday, our bargaining team received notice from AT&T's representatives, that the company wants to enter into federal mediation. Considering AT&T's bad faith tactics during these negotiations, *our bargaining team is hopeful that mediation might lead us to the agreement our members deserve.*” [Emphasis added]

In other words, with the rank-and-file demanding real gains, and the company determined to extract further concessions to pad its profits, the union bureaucracy was unable to pawn off the federally appointed mediator as a just-arbiter rather than a pro-company representative—as has been repeatedly the case with the history of federal mediation over the decades.

The CWA's latest moves highlight the bankruptcy of the union apparatus which is desperate to shut down the strike by presenting a rotten contract that it can force down workers' throats and pass off as a great victory.

During the negotiations with the company in 2019, the union shut down a strike after just 6 days and imposed an utterly rotten contract. This despite the fact that the workers showed great militancy and determination. The only complaint the union had at that time, as in the latest strike, was “unfair labor practices.”

While 22,000 workers went on strike in 2019 this has fallen to 17,000 workers across the nine states, pointing to thousands of job cuts even after taking retirements and workers leaving for other jobs into account.

That the current strike was called with great reluctance by the CWA bureaucracy can be gleaned from the fact that prior to the preparation for a potential strike ahead of contract expiration in August, the union leadership had proudly noted that: “Prior to 2019,

AT&T workers in District 3 hadn't been on strike in over thirty years. We may have caught the company by surprise then, but rest assured, that will not happen again. They will be prepared. We must do everything in our power to ensure that we are."

During the current strike, on several days during August, there were no pickets at the prominent work locations in Atlanta where workers had picketed energetically back in 2019. Other "preparations" taken by the union prior to the strike include showing support to the CWA by encouraging workers to drape their truck seats with CWA District 3 T-shirts and fill their gas tanks for exactly \$20.24.

The union has not openly declared what wage increases it is seeking and what other demands it might be making on behalf of the workers, instead claiming generally it is determined to secure "the contract our members deserve."

All of this blackout on information indicates that the union is desperately trying to end the strike with the most meager wage increases and other benefits despite workers' wages having taken a severe hit from surging inflation over the last five years.

The CWA in April quoted its President, Claude Cummings Jr., stressing that "Unity is our greatest strength. Our power is in our people, and the union will always stand together."

Such words about unity are both entirely empty and hypocritical, as is shown by the fact that AT&T workers in District 9, which includes 8,000 workers in California and Nevada, have been bargaining for a new 2024 labor-contract at the same time as District 3. The workers of District 9 voted by 92 percent to strike in April, yet the CWA did not call a strike but instead drew out negotiations with the ruthless corporation which the union itself notes "raked in over \$24 billion in profit last year."

It then presented a Tentative Agreement (TA) the CWA claimed was a "significant achievement" despite measly pay increases and no pension increases for retirees. The union presented a 14.25 percent wage increase over four years—plus a \$500 ratification bonus—proudly to its membership and urged the workers to vote for the TA. Other highlights it presented were similarly meager with the company retaining the upper hand on every aspect of the contract including healthcare costs and job security.

This TA was rejected by the membership with 58 percent voting against it. The CWA upon this rejection sent a letter to its members acknowledging the defeat and stating: "While we are not on strike at this moment, please be prepared to mobilize in the event a strike is called by President Cummings."

In other words, the head of the union bureaucracy will solely decide on the future course of action despite the workers' overwhelming strike authorization. The union will no doubt bargain a new TA with minor tweaks or more likely try to shove the existing TA down the throats of the workers by forcing the workers to vote repeatedly until the rank and file provide the union with the "right answer."

The most glaring fact remains that the CWA is keeping the struggle of AT&T District 3 and District 9 workers completely apart instead of uniting them and all other 7 CWA district workers in a common offensive against this highly profitable corporation.

This is why the *World Socialist Web Site* is calling upon the workers to take matters into their own hands by forming their own, militant rank and file committees to take control of "bargaining" from the bureaucracy. These rank-and-file committees would advance demands for what workers need, not what AT&T and the CWA officials say is possible, uniting workers across the company for a common uncompromising struggle to obtain massive wage increases, better working conditions, free healthcare and job security.



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