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AT&T, Conn. union still far apart

BY DAVID KRECHEVSKY REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

AT&T Inc. said this week that unionized workers in the Southwest have voted to ratify a new four-year contract, but the company and union negotiators in Connecticut remain far apart.

The vote by Communications Workers of America District 6 — which serves 26,000 workers in Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas — means nearly 70 percent of the approximately 120,000 employees covered under AT&T's landline contracts have now ratified agreements. Contracts have also been ratified in the Midwest and West regions, as well as with so-called "legacy AT&T" workers, which covers employees nationwide. A contract with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers has also been approved by workers.

That leaves just two districts without contracts — District 3, representing nine states in the Southeast, and District 1 in the East, which includes Connecticut workers. Employees in both regions continue to work under terms of their previous contracts.

The East region is the only district where the contract expired on April 4 but no agreement has yet been reached. The contract in District 3 expired Aug. 8.

Negotiations between District 1 and AT&T began Feb. 28, but the last time the two sides met across the bargaining table was Oct. 8.

Walt Sharp, spokesman for AT&T in Texas, said the union has not asked to meet since then. "We're waiting for the union to indicate they want to talk," he said.

William Henderson, president of Local 1298 of the CWA, which represents about 4,000 landline workers in Connecticut, said Thursday that the reason the union has not requested to meet again is that the company is not willing to discuss the union's concerns.

"We said, 'Look, we're bargaining with ourselves here. It takes two people to come to a contract,'" Henderson said, adding that the company was giving the union negotiators "ultimatums." He said the union's key issue is job security, since AT&T has eliminated or moved about 1,200 Connecticut jobs over the past two years.

"Our issue is keeping jobs in Connecticut," he said. "You don't care what kind of benefits you have if you don't have job."

Sharp said the company has been able to reach agreements on job security and other issues with five other negotiations, including three with other CWA districts.

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