

AT&T Bargaining Council Meetings Set Stage for '09 Talks

Determined to bring the same energy to bargaining with AT&T that their members brought to the 2008 political campaigns, local CWA leaders from across the country met this week in Dallas to prepare for talks with the telecom giant beginning in early 2009.

Although negotiations for AT&T Core will take place at six tables, in addition to bargaining for AT&T Mobility's "Orange" contract, the theme of the bargaining council meetings was one of solidarity: "One Union, One Fight, One Future."



"One Union, One Fight, One Future" is theme for AT&T bargaining council meetings this week in Dallas. Pres. Cohen, at right, told participants: "If we go in with a sense of unity, we couldn't be stronger."

"If we go in with a sense of unity, we couldn't be stronger," CWA President Larry Cohen told the 300 participants as he opened the conference Monday night. "This union is sending a signal that we're fighting back. We're mad but we're hopeful and we're on the march. And we'll be on the march until every worker has a decent contract."

Contracting out of work, changes in job titles and job descriptions and other job security issues surrounding AT&T's consolidation of various former Bell companies were major concerns for participants, along with the enormous economic challenges facing the country and the never-ending attempts to rollback health care benefits for workers and retirees.

Not all issues affect each geographic region the same way, and CWA national leaders said they understand that locals and districts have developed their own ways of doing business with the company over the years. "We're family, and like family, we may have some disagreements," CWA Executive Vice President Annie Hill said. "But we need to leave with a sense of purpose about what we want to accomplish and recognize that we're all in this together."

Ensuring that CWA's contracts keep pace with the rapid changes in technology and wireless expansion is a key bargaining issue, and conference speakers and local officers in attendance said that it's vital that the union be vigilant. Telecom expert Andrew Saybold discussed technological changes on the horizon, noting that there will always be jobs – even if they are fewer in number – for landline workers. "Spectrum is a finite resource," he said. "There's not enough wireless spectrum in the world to replace wired."

He went on to discuss what the future holds and what AT&T is and isn't doing to compete. Notably, he said the company leaders "don't get it" with regard to fiber to the home. "If they don't wake up and start doing fiber seriously, they're going to be in trouble," he said. "Whatever you do, you've got to figure out how to get AT&T into the fiber business, and quickly."

For CWA, bargaining with AT&T coincides with its two biggest legislative campaigns – passage of the Employee Free Choice Act and health care reform. But working toward passing the vital bills won't stop CWA from fighting just as hard as ever for workers' rights and health care issues during negotiations, national leaders said.

"We have to do two things at once, we have to be able to walk and chew gum," Hill said. "The Verizon folks had to do it and the Qwest folks had to do it because we were in bargaining while we were also focused on getting the right people elected." The AT&T Mobility bargaining will begin first, on Jan. 21, 2009, in Richmond, Va., The current Mobility "Orange" contract expires Feb. 7.

The Core talks will take place at six tables around the country beginning Feb. 24 to negotiate with AT&T Legacy, and with five regional contracts: AT&T East (formerly SNET), AT&T West (formerly PacBell), AT&T Midwest (formerly Ameritech) AT&T South (formerly Southwestern Bell) and AT&T Southeast (formerly BellSouth). All contracts expire April 4, except for AT&T Southeast, which expires in August -- but bargaining there will be held in unison with the other companies.