



AT&T Goes After Workers Health Care, Organizing Rights

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Union fights against company's contract

Members of the Communication Workers of America union are currently engaged in an important contract struggle with AT&T, the country's largest unionized private employer.

Over 100,000 workers in the East, Northeast, Midwest, Southwest and West regions have been without a contract since April 4 after they refused to accept major concessions. The contract for AT&T in the Southeast expires Aug. 6, but negotiations have begun early.

CWA locals have held rallies and picket lines all across the country, including in California, Texas, Wisconsin, Ohio and many other places. A vast majority of the workers affected have voted to authorize strikes in order to win the contract battle.

AT&T's insulting contract proposal is rife with takebacks and benefit cuts. On the corporation's chopping block, among other things, are health care and union organizing rights. The company wants to institute higher health care premiums, deductibles and out-of-pocket costs.

The sharp increase in health care premiums would effectively cut salaries by as much as 10 percent. New employees would have a second-tier health plan. The proposed contract would also dramatically cut health care benefits to retirees, which were supposed to be life-time benefits guaranteed to them by their hard-fought contracts when they were active AT&T employees.

Job security would also be compromised and the existing Card Check Organizing Agreement, which allows non-union AT&T workers to choose whether to join CWA without management interference, would be eliminated.

While AT&T has tried to compare the CWA health care plan to that of employees of the automakers in order to justify the contract proposal, the situation for the world's largest telecommunications company is far different. AT&T made profits of \$12.9 billion in 2008 and will likely make similar or larger profits this year.



Communication workers march on AT&T in New Haven, Conn. to defeat the company's attempt to slash health care benefits

The company's CEO, Randall Stephenson, made nearly \$12 million in salary and other compensation. AT&T also paid \$1.7 million to buy Stephenson's home from him when AT&T moved its corporate headquarters from San Antonio to Dallas, Texas, and Stephenson was unable to sell his home, himself. [3]

The bosses at AT&T are using the current economic crisis as an excuse to erode the hard-won victories of CWA workers. This is not the only industry where the capitalists are demanding increased concessions from workers while unemployment continues to reach the highest levels in decades.

Many CWA members are workers for AT&T's Core division, which works on landlines like those for home or business phones. As more people rely on mobile technology, AT&T should be retraining workers in these new technologies to ensure the rights of workers to a job. In fact, one of CWA's demands is that the company allow recently laid-off AT&T workers to apply for jobs in these emerging fields.

In the face of these insulting contract offers CWA members at AT&T are taking action. Two AT&T workers in Houston created a song and ring-tone called "Ready to Strike" that has quickly spread across blogs and YouTube. The lyrics include, "Get ready to strike; get ready to walk the line and protect my health care; don't lower my wages. Realize, recognize, mobilize, stay alive."

A large rally of over 3,000 union members and supporters took place on April 4 in New Haven, Conn. After rallying downtown at the New Haven Green, the spirited crowd marched to the AT&T building, led by the local's bargaining committee. Marchers chanted "CWA, here to stay!" and "No contract, no work!"

In front of the AT&T building, a union member asked the assembled crowd, "How is it fair that Randall [Stephenson] gets help selling his house from the company, and we're out here doing all the work and struggling to pay our mortgages and feed our families?"

In the current fight, the CWA is struggling to keep basic rights for its workers. Health care coverage and the right to a job for today's workers, as well as continued health care benefits and pensions for those who have retired, are not out of reach except for the greed of the executives and bosses.

During a capitalist crisis, or in other times when the bosses and Wall Street seek to enrich themselves by weakening unions, they will promote anti-union propaganda, claiming that the unions are the problem—that unions are greedy or corrupt if the members don't agree to cuts in pay, health care coverage, retirement benefits and more.

The struggle of the CWA members at AT&T affects all workers. Health care is a right that has been won in struggle. Yet it is increasingly under attack by Wall Street. The only way to defend these rights is through organizing. All workers have a stake in defending the CWA workers and should stand in solidarity with them.

