



## AT&T: Union stages protest at call center in Marietta

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With the sky threatening to pour Monday morning, a group of 100 people gathered at an AT&T call center in Marietta, where some 350 workers are about to lose their jobs.

The crowd was there to lay blame, as well as to offer a solution.

"It's caused by one thing, folks. It's caused by corporate greed," Noah V. Savant, vice president of District 3 of the Communications Workers of America, told the crowd, which included Lt. Gov. Mark Taylor.

The union contends the jobs of 342 of its members, who sell and support residential local and long-distance service, are being shipped overseas.

"Managers from this location were sent to the Philippines and India last year to train and help open offshore call centers," said Roy Hegenbart, president of CWA Local 3250, which represents AT&T workers in Georgia, Florida and Tennessee. "Now, 342 Georgia jobs are being shipped overseas. Most of the work will be outsourced to 328 workers at a call center now in operation in the Philippines."

AT&T spokeswoman Tracey Belko disputed that claim.

"Recent work force reductions at this telemarketing call center in Marietta are necessary because we are no longer marketing traditional consumer services as a result of adverse federal regulatory decisions," Belko said.

"These jobs are not being filled elsewhere, and any assertion to the contrary is wrong and misguided," she said. "We are baffled that the CWA leadership is feigning surprise at these job cuts. They actively lobbied in favor of regulatory changes that they knew would result in fewer jobs for their members working at AT&T."

Because of federal decisions, local phone companies such as BellSouth no longer have to lease their lines to rivals such as AT&T at discounted rates established by state regulators.

As a result, AT&T, MCI and several others have announced plans to no longer actively market residential local and long-distance service. However, AT&T continues to offer residential service to existing customers. It also will accept new business from those who call on their own to subscribe.

With its revenue and profits under pressure, AT&T recently agreed to be acquired by SBC Communications, a regional Bell. MCI also recently agreed to be acquired by Verizon Communications, another regional Bell.

When the workers at the Marietta call center lose their jobs March 25, they will join more than a quarter of a million other people who will have lost their jobs in the U.S. telecommunications industry since 2001.

That's one out of every five jobs in the sector.

The employment picture is even worse among wired telecommunications carriers, such as AT&T, MCI and BellSouth.

There, nearly one in four jobs have been lost since 2001, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Local 3250, based in Norcross, currently has 1,600 members, all but 50 employed at AT&T, Hegenbart said. It had 5,500 members four or five years ago, he said. The job cuts at the Marietta call center were announced in January.

Carriers have been cutting costs as their revenue has declined for a variety of reasons, including the entry of cable companies into the phone business, substitution of wireless for wireline service, and adoption of new technologies such as Internet-based phone service, by businesses and others.

That competition continues to erode the prices of telecommunications services, analysts say. But carriers' ability to extract further savings is becoming limited, some analysts argue.

"The growing complexity of devices, plan options and overall choices will further raise the number of [customer] calls and hence the cost, negating the cost savings associated with outsourcing customer care centers to India," said analysts Dominic Endicott, Gary Neilson and Reggie Van Lee at the Booz Allen Hamilton consulting firm in a report last December.

Even so, Charlie Flemming, president of the AFL-CIO's Atlanta and North Georgia Central Labor Council, told the crowd the public can help stem the outflow of jobs.

"We should ask who's on the other end [of the line] and where they are based," Flemming said. "We shouldn't have to deal with someone from India. We should insist on dealing with someone from Georgia."

