

Canada: Telus workers reject concession-laden settlement

By David Adelaide
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Workers at Telus, the largest telecommunications concern in western Canada, have voted by a narrow margin to reject the tentative settlement reached between the leadership of the Telecommunications Workers Union and management in early October. That the workers have voted down the proposed settlement, against the recommendation of their union leadership and despite walking the picket line for more than three months, speaks both to the character of the proposed settlement and to the workers' determination.

But if the Telus workers' struggle is not to become the latest in a long line of defeats presided over by the trade union bureaucracy, it must be re-launched on an entirely different basis.

At the centre of the conflict at Telus lies the company's drive to gain "flexibility" by contracting out work normally performed by union members. The 12,500 workers have been locked out since late July, after a walkout staged in protest against the company's attempt to unilaterally impose a contract that would have done away with many existing restrictions on the contracting out of work.

From the beginning, the company has conducted the lockout in the most aggressive manner, retaining the services of professional strike-breakers (the Accufax International Group), seeking injunctions limiting picketing, and summarily dismissing workers for alleged violations of those injunctions. In the first days of the lockout Telus even used its position as a major Internet service provider in Alberta and BC to block access to a union discussion web site.

In September the company revealed that it had already begun to contract out work normally performed by the locked-out workers. Company spokesmen announced that 20 percent of Telus customer-care and operator-service work was to be handled by Amergris, a call-centre based in the Philippines.

Telus's response to the rejection of the proposed settlement has been to step up its campaign to smash the workers' resistance to its designs. The company has flatly refused any return to the negotiating table, while simultaneously brandishing the accomplished facts of outsourcing and scab labour. Telus, declared company CEO Darren Entwistle, would "now return the entirety of our focus to our *alternative* operations plan" (emphasis added). To underline that the company is ready to do without the strikers for a prolonged period, if not permanently, Entwistle claimed that Telus has made "significant progress ... toward delivering service excellence to our customers."

The company's greatest asset in seeking to impose its concessionary conditions upon the Telus workers has been the union leadership, which from the beginning has endeavoured to contain the workers' struggle within forms that pose no threat to the company's long-term financial interests.

On the one hand, the TWU mounted a "boycott" campaign in which Telus subscribers were asked to cancel their extended phone features. On the other, the union has directed its members to focus their energies on lobbying the big business politicians of the federal Liberal government to intervene in the dispute. (The telecommunications industry is governed by federal labour law.) According to the union leadership, Telus is simply a renegade corporate citizen that needs to either "see the light" or be "reined in" by enlightened legislators in Canada's national parliament. In fact, in the telecommunications industry, as all others, capital has responded to increased competition by seeking to maintain or increase profit levels through an all-out assault on jobs and working conditions. The conflict at Telus bears striking similarities to those at two other major telecommunications companies, Atlantic Canada-based Aliant in 2004 and Québec-based

Vidéotron in 2003.

When British Columbia's teachers waged a two-week-long illegal strike against the imposition of a contract by the right-wing provincial Liberal government of Gordon Campbell, the locked-out Telus workers played an important role in mobilizing public support for the striking teachers. But this elementary expression of class solidarity took place despite the politics of the TWU. The union leadership has not made any effort to link the struggle of Telus workers with that of wider layers of the working class and insists that the Telus workers' struggle remain within the straitjacket of collective-bargaining—i.e., an acceptance of the permanence and inviolability of the existing social-political order.

In early October, just as the teachers' strike was beginning, the TWU leadership announced that it had come to terms with Telus. It has since come to light that Buzz Hargrove, the president of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union, joined with top TWU officials to pressure the bargaining committee to approve the proposed settlement arguing, according to dissident bargaining committee member Lila Hackett, that "the government wasn't going to help, we're running out of money, [and] that other unions or federations would not help if we had no money ..."

Hargrove's participation is significant. The head of the country's largest industrial union, he is a consummate union bureaucrat and political operator who specializes in giving a militant spin to the most egregious contract concessions and corporatist relations with the auto, aerospace and other corporate giants.

The details of the proposed settlement have been kept tightly under wraps. But there is no question that the deal was heavily laden with concessions and differed little from the contract Telus sought to impose last July. The characterization Hackett made of the tentative agreement in her minority report is worth quoting at length:

"To bring this offer to the membership without even the most basic principles of unionism such as seniority rights was not an option for me. We still have no definition of core [i.e., the section of Telus's activities to which some job security provisions were to continue to apply]. We have no relocation or retraining committee to ensure that members whose work is contracted out are looked after. We have no way of guaranteeing that what Bell has done to its clerical workers just recently will not happen to us (Bell sought and received a \$5.00 per hour wage cut citing 'competitive factors' and threatening to outsource

their work if it wasn't agreed to.) We have given up on all employees being treated in a just and equitable manner. We have given up the right for Alberta employees to be paid equally for exactly the same work as their BC counterparts until 2010. We have even given up the 'maintenance of membership' clauses which stipulate that you must belong to the union in order to work for Telus or that you must be a Rand employee [i.e., pay dues to the union]. The list goes on."

In an attempt to wear down the resistance of the workers to this betrayal, the TWU drew the ratification process out over the greater part of October. Nevertheless, of the 9,027 workers who voted on the agreement, a slim majority of 4,540 or 50.3 percent voted to reject it. The narrow margin does not in any way diminish the extent to which the vote represents a stinging rebuke to the union leadership.

Following the rejection vote, the most that the TWU leadership could suggest as a way forward was to "approach the company to get them back to the bargaining table." In other words, the union bureaucracy intends to continue isolating the Telus workers and to insist that their struggle remain within the straitjacket of a collective bargaining dispute.

The determination of the locked-out Telus workers to stand up to the company must be welded to a broader political strategy that consciously seeks to make their struggle a spearhead of a working-class counteroffensive against the assault big business, the political establishment and the state have mounted on jobs, working conditions, public services and workers' rights.

Militant industrial action must be tied to the struggle to build a new party of the international working class that is committed to radically reorganizing the world economy so that the technological revolution can be used to improve the life of all, not slash jobs, speed up production and swell the profits squeezed from working people.

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