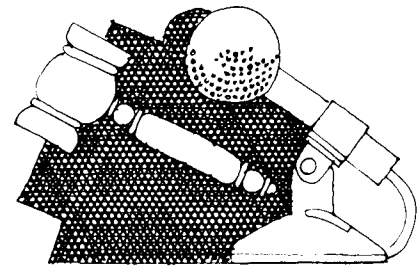


Conventions



Communications Workers focus on bargaining with AT&T

STEVEN M. DONAHUE

With the theme, "we're union, family, and proud," and promises that no concessions will be given to profitable companies, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) met in Washington, DC, for their 48th annual convention. Convention activities centered on current and pending negotiations, organizing, the union's finances, and the election of officers. In most of these actions, the influence of CWA's Committee on the Future and the effects of corporate divestiture were apparent. Gaveling the convention to order for the first time was Morton Bahr, who replaced Glenn Watts as president when the latter retired in 1985.

Bargaining. For the CWA, 1986 will be filled with critical bargaining activity. For the first time, the union will negotiate with an American Telephone and Telegraph Co. (AT&T) divested of its operating arms, which have become the Regional Bell Operating Companies. Also scheduled for negotiations are agreements at the General Telephone Co. subsidiaries across the United States, the ALLTEL system, four units of the Continental System, and public sector workers in a number of States, most importantly, New Jersey.

AT&T negotiations began April 2 after the union and the company agreed to move the scheduled August 9, 1986, contract expiration date to May 31. Expiration of the Regional Bell Operating Companies' contracts will remain August 9. President Bahr noted that the early negotiations at AT&T "... allow us to concentrate our resources and energies on these talks so that in turn, we can focus better on the task of bargaining with the Regional Bell companies later on." In support of bargaining, the Executive Board authorized the transfer of \$1 million from the general fund to the defense fund, permitting Communication Workers to strike June 1 in the event an agreement is not reached. The negotiations will be conducted on behalf of 155,000 employees. In concurrent bargaining, the International Brotherhood of

Electrical Workers will represent an additional 40,000 workers, making this round of negotiations the largest single-employer talks to be held during 1986.

Negotiations with General Telephone began in March at General of California and will continue through December at nine other sites. At ALLTEL, another independent system, talks also run through the end of 1986, while bargaining with the four units of Continental will take place in September and November.

Citing increased profits and continued growth in the telecommunications industry, in particular, at AT&T and the regionals, Bahr told the convention that the union will seek a base wage increase and will oppose a two-tiered wage structure. In the California negotiations with General Telephone, union leaders rejected a two-tiered proposal that would have downgraded jobs held predominantly by women. In the AT&T negotiations, said Bahr, the union's goal is to obtain a fair settlement which would also keep the company financially healthy without the need for a two-tiered wage structure. In justification, Bahr noted that telecommunications worker productivity had increased at an average rate of 6 percent per year for the past 10 years, a period when U.S. industry overall experienced negative productivity growth rates. In addition, he cited financial reports which stated that AT&T had net profits of \$1.56 billion in 1985, and quoted forecasts for an additional 8 percent profit increase during 1986. Moreover, all seven regional companies reported higher profits in 1985.

According to CWA officials, the divestiture of AT&T has cost union members 53,000 jobs over the past 12 months. Decrying the increased contracting out of union jobs to nonunion subsidiaries and outside contractors, the union has made establishment of a training and retraining program for CWA employees at AT&T a major goal. The retraining program, Bahr said, could be designed to parallel the Ford-UAW training and development program currently in place. Ford has established a fund for the purpose of training and retraining to be used by all employees, including those facing layoff. It is funded by a 5-cent-per-hour setaside paid for by Ford. A similar program at AT&T would enable CWA members to fill job openings in other parts of the company. The union is also seeking comparable jobs within the company for employees affected by work force adjustments and plant and office closings. Bahr noted that his members will have to become more mobile as jobs and opportunities emerge in various parts of the country.

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The convention was told that a major change in bargaining being introduced this year employs much of the same technology currently causing layoffs in the telecommunications industry. An electronic hookup using 'Easylink' satellite services will allow local unions to receive up-to-date information pertaining to AT&T district bargaining matters anywhere in the country. In addition to this daily hook-up, a nationwide conference is planned via the PBS TV network which will be beamed into closed door meetings on PBS' private downlinks. CWA's nationwide conference will allow stewards across the country to communicate face-to-face and will expedite the free exchange of necessary information on a more timely basis. The resulting rapid communication should forestall, said the Committee on the Future in its 1983 report, Regional Bell management from using whip-saw strategies and would limit internal dissent over perceived contract inequities among regions. The May 24 meeting was attended by local stewards in more than 40 cities.

Another concern of the CWA centers on health care cost containment. Bahr noted that health care costs have escalated dramatically in the past few years and that the union intends to work with AT&T to control them. The union, however, will not allow AT&T to control its costs by shifting the burden to union members and other employees, Bahr said. Such a strategy was attempted at General Telephone in early 1986 negotiations. Delegates also passed a resolution which called for the union to work for enactment of a national health care cost containment bill and to support multi-union and coalition attempts (including labor-management cooperative programs) to control costs.

In conjunction with the opening of the 1986 bargaining round, the CWA unveiled an extensive public relations campaign aimed at the Nation's decisionmakers and the general public. The program began in April with a full-page ad in a major U.S. newspaper. The cost to the national union for the overall program is expected to be approximately \$1 million and does not include local participation in the program. The advertising, which will also be in broadcast form, revolves around the theme of "fair settlements from profitable companies." In addition to this ongoing campaign, there were special advertisements on Mother's Day, one of the largest phone calling days of the year. This Mother's Day campaign provided free phone calls, special local newspaper supplements, and Mother's Day cards for specified AT&T and Regional Bell employees, and revolved around the theme, "Ma Bell's gone but the CWA family lives on." Both campaigns were designed to draw positive public attention to the work of CWA members during national bargaining. The campaign arose from a recommendation of the Committee on the Future.

In public sector developments, the union noted job losses as work, formerly done by members, is contracted out by many local governments. Delegates passed a resolution which resolved to fight privatization of public sector work

and to make any nonunion firm which accepts privatized work a target of union organizing drives.

Organizing. Faced with the continuing erosion of membership in an industry which has dropped from 100 percent unionization to 38 percent, organizing has become a major goal of the CWA. Delegates were notified of recent successful organizing campaigns and amalgamation agreements. In the public sector, major representation elections were won in New Jersey at Passaic County's Board of Social Services, at the University of Toledo (OH), and among environmental protection employees in western New York. The 5,800-member Union of Telegraph Employees voted to recommend a merger with the CWA, and 10,000 members of the Telephone Traffic Union in upstate New York have already merged.

In keeping with the recommendations of the Committee on the Future, CWA is targeting public sector workers as a major component of organizing campaigns. The Committee recommended that external growth be centered mainly on the information/service sectors, which is one of the fastest growing segments of the American economy. The establishment of a national vice president for public workers was the first step in this strategy. To date, the CWA is the bargaining agent for more than 80,000 public sector workers. "In addition," said Bahr, "we are establishing new lines of cooperation with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees International Union and others that will lead to a cooperative effort to organize millions of unorganized government and service workers in this country."

Future organizing campaigns are being undertaken, the convention delegates were told, as part of AFL-CIO coordinated campaigns at both Northern Telecom and Blue Cross/Blue Shield. In the Blue Cross coordinated campaign, the CWA has been awarded jurisdiction in New York City and Denver. The union has already negotiated a neutrality agreement with Blue Cross of New York City under which the company agreed not to oppose CWA. The organizing campaign at the 29 plants of Northern Telecom is being coordinated by the AFL-CIO's Industrial Union Department. Northern Telecom is one of AT&T's largest U.S. telecommunications equipment competitors.

In addition, organizers for CWA have laid the groundwork for a campaign at the IBM Corp., long a bastion of nonunion work forces. While no details were given pertaining to the IBM campaign to ensure needed secrecy, delegates were told that IBM employees had been contacted. Said Bahr, "IBM Workers United has been born and has chapters around the United States. We are providing assistance and encouragement to this fledgling organization." CWA is also meeting with labor leaders around the world to extend IBM organizing to other countries.

The CWA has also targeted AT&T competitors in the telecommunications industry for organizing. Bahr stated

that organizers already are actively contacting MCI employees.

Finances. Secretary-Treasurer James Booe noted in an addendum to the financial committee's report that the union was experiencing a cash flow shortage which, if not treated, would entail cutbacks or dues increases by the 1987 convention. According to the *Report of the Finance Committee*, it expects a cash shortage of approximately \$3.5 million by 1987. Booe blamed the revenue shrinkage on new losses averaging an additional 1,500 dues units each month, most arising from divestiture.

Delegates to the convention rejected a proposal by the union's officers to make the convention biennial as a cost-saving measure. Citing increased expenses at a time of constricting membership, executive board officers estimated substantial annual savings if biennial conventions were to start in 1989. But delegates maintained that the union needed to continue the tradition of democracy which the CWA had built up over the years. A second amendment to hold conventions every 18 months was also rejected by convention delegates.

Elections and other activities. The completion of the CWA restructuring program reduced the number of districts from 13 to 8, resulting in the displacement of 5 incumbent district directors. The new districts were designed to parallel the Regional Bell Operating Companies' geographical structure. Elected as district vice presidents were: Jan D. Pierce, R. Ben Porch, Martin J. Hughes, Walter Maulis, Harry Ibsen, Pete Catucci, T.O. Parsons, and Vincent Maisano. In addition, M.E. Nichols and John C. Carroll were both reelected unanimously as executive vice presidents. In the national bargaining unit elections, James Irving was named AT&T communications vice president, Ronald J. Allen was

elected vice president for AT&T technologies, John Browning retained his seat as vice president for communications, and Connie Bryant was elected as the first vice president for public workers. The addition of two national bargaining unit vice presidents and the transformation of two national directors into bargaining unit vice presidents arose from recommendations of the CWA's Committee on the Future, which suggested that strategy centers be created to allow the union to deal creatively and directly with external power centers (that is, AT&T).

Delegates to the convention passed a resolution supporting the AFL-CIO boycott of Royal Dutch Shell and its subsidiaries. The boycott was called because of Shell's mining and exploration activities in South Africa. In a related matter, delegates also called for complete removal of Bierne Foundation funds which are invested in South Africa. It was noted that the Foundation still had investments in two companies which do business in South Africa.

Speakers at the convention included Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, Representative James Wright of Texas, Washington, DC Mayor Marion Barry, United Farm Workers President Cesar Chavez, and AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland. □

Postscript: CWA workers strike

A nationwide strike by 155,000 CWA members at AT&T began when the existing contract expired on May 31. However, the parties continued to negotiate on issues involving wages, job security, and changes in job classifications and pay levels.

Further information on the talks will be reported in the "Developments in Industrial Relations" section of future issues of the *Review*.