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Organizing for Everything We Do: CWA at AT&T and US West

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Organizing for Everything We Do: CWA at AT&T and US West

Abstract

[Excerpt] In the Communications Workers of America, we've been facing tough challenges in recent years. Add Reaganomics to the breakup of the Bell System and changing technology, and you have a formula for a rough time at the bargaining table. To increase our power, we've increasingly been using an organizing approach for everything we do. We call it "Mobilization."

Keywords

mobilization, union organizing, CWA, AT&T, US West



HEALTH CARE FOR ALL

CUTTING OUR HEALTH BENEFITS IS A SICK IDEA.

CWA JOBS WITH JUSTICE

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CWA JOBS WITH JUSTICE

CARE ALL

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Organizing for Everything We Do

CWA at AT&T and US West

■ *Margaret Butler*

In the Communications Workers of America, we've been facing tough challenges in recent years. Add Reaganomics to the breakup of the Bell System and changing technology, and you have a formula for a rough time at the bargaining table. To increase our power, we've increasingly been using an organizing approach for everything we do. We call it "Mobilization."

It is easy to see the difference an organizing approach makes when you look at our experience with bargaining at AT&T and US West in 1986 and 1989. In 1986 it was bargaining as usual, and we came out weaker than we started after a four-week strike at AT&T and a peaceful settlement with US West. In 1989, we built and used our mobilization structure and, even though it was a tough round of negotiations in an unfriendly climate, we got an excellent contract at AT&T and held the line at US West. Most important, the union was stronger because of our 1989 bargaining experience.

CWA represents nearly 700,000 workers in the U. S. and Canada, the majority of whom are in the telephone industry. In Portland, Oregon, we represent approximately 3,000 workers—2,200 in the

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- Margaret Butler was recently elected Executive Vice President of Local 7901 of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) in Portland, Oregon. A telephone operator for Pacific Northwest Bell for 10 years, in 1989 she was Local 7901's Mobilization Coordinator.

US West bargaining units, 500 who work for AT&T, and the rest in smaller units. The membership is 65% female; the bulk of our members work in clerical, sales and operator jobs, although there are still a sizable number of technicians.

1986: Bargaining the Old Way

To tell this story, I need to back up and give a little history. 1983 was our last pre-divestiture round of bargaining in the telecommunications industry. On January 1, 1984, the telephone monopoly was dismantled, leaving the United States with six Regional Bell Operating Companies (RBOCs) and AT&T. AT&T, the old holding company, now exists as a separate entity providing long distance service and equipment.

In August of 1983, CWA was pushed out on strike over employment security, wages and health care benefits. We were out for 21 days. No one in our local expected to strike, and the local leadership had to scramble to pull the strike together. We had problems with getting information from the bargaining table in New Jersey, trouble getting that information out to our members, and trouble with strike assistance money. Because of these problems, we lost a lot of membership support in 1983, with many resigning from the local as a result of the strike.

In 1986 bargaining, we were negotiating separate contracts with AT&T and the RBOCs for the first time. The 26 Bell contracts that had been negotiated in 1983 continued to apply to our AT&T members after divestiture. We knew that it would be a tough round of bargaining and that getting a decent settlement with AT&T would be hard. Locally, we were much better prepared in 1986 than we had been in 1983. We had better information flow from the International, getting at least daily computerized reports from the bargaining table.

We were on strike against AT&T for 26 days over health care benefits, employment security, downgrading of work, and wages. When our members went back to work at the end of June, many of them felt that the settlement wasn't good enough after almost a month on strike. We didn't get the wage increase we had been fighting for. We kept our health care benefits intact, but we took concessions in our employment security clause. And the contract introduced a new job classification that fragmented and downgraded the technicians' work. We had said that we would not settle a contract that had any of these concessions. This time, however, our AT&T members stuck with CWA, even though they weren't happy with the contract, because they knew it would have been

quite a bit worse without the strike. People felt that we just didn't have the power to force anything better.

While our AT&T members were on strike, our Pacific Northwest Bell contract expiration date was drawing near. US West is now the holding company that owns Pacific Northwest Bell, Mountain Bell and Northwestern Bell, but in 1986 we were still bargaining those three contracts separately. We ended up with settlements at Pacific Northwest Bell and Northwestern Bell and a two-day strike at Mountain Bell.

It was a very hard time. The local leadership did its best to get bargaining information out to the members through the steward structure and through worksite visits, but there was no effective organization, so it wasn't done systematically. Members weren't asked to do anything besides read whatever information we had. At Pacific Northwest Bell, we had 400 members resign from the union that summer. Everyone was scared, had bad memories of 1983 and no sense at all of their power. Members told both management and the union leadership that they just wanted to keep what they had. They were looking at the changes caused by divestiture and at the AT&T strike, and didn't want to be involved.

We weren't happy with the 1986 contract settlement. At Pacific Northwest Bell, given our lack of strength, we were relieved that we hadn't tried to strike. But we were displeased with the wage package, which included "Team Award" (a lump sum payment that substituted for much of our usual base wage increase) and eliminated our Cost of Living Allowance (COLA).

Setting Up Mobilization

The International wasn't happy with the way the 1986 bargaining went either. People on many levels of leadership within the organization knew that we needed to do something different to increase our power during bargaining.

Larry Cohen, our Organizing Director, put together a meeting with the Boilermakers in 1987, to see what we could learn from their in-plant strategy programs. By the middle of 1988, we were starting to put "Mobilization CWA" together across the nation.

In 1989 we used Mobilization for every contract we negotiated, including the smaller bargaining units our local represents. The contrast between 1986 and 1989 bargaining was stark. At both AT&T and US West, we signed up more members during the contract campaign, we involved many more members in the bargaining process, and our membership came away from bargaining with a clear sense of its own power.

Our model of mobilization has three steps: organize, educate, and act. First, we set up the structure, then we educate our members on the issue at hand, then we take collective action to push our agenda. It is a continuing process; after each action or set of actions, it's time to go back and reorganize the structure.

The core of Mobilization is a one-on-one communication network. Our goal is to have face-to-face contact with every member and potential member on a regular basis. This means that we can have two-way communication, that we're able to get a clear picture of how our members actually feel about any given issue. It also means that we've turned our stewards and active members into organizers and that we are developing leadership in an ongoing way. In Portland, we started by recruiting Building Coordinators to take charge of mobilization for their location. As the local's Mobilization Coordinator, I worked with the Building Coordinators to recruit Worksite Coordinators. Each Worksite Coordinator is responsible for contacting about 20 members. With each canvass, the Worksite Coordinators fill out reports on the outcome of each one-on-one conversation.

In the fall of 1988, our local trained about 180 Worksite Coordinators. The training included information about the Mobilization structure and their role in it, and one-on-one communication skills. The training was a very energizing and inspiring experience for every participant.

The International had prepared four brochures to use in educating our members for bargaining. One explained bargaining and Mobilization, and the other three dealt with each of our top three bargaining issues. Each brochure was passed out in separate one-on-one canvasses during the months prior to bargaining. Each Worksite Coordinator had face-to-face conversations with his or her 20 members, asking them to read the brochure and pointing out important things to think about. The CWA Research Department provided information about the financial state of our major employers and the telecommunications industry as a whole, and about health care bargaining, employment security and wage negotiations.

1989 AT&T Bargaining

Mobilization was coordinated nationally for our AT&T contract, which expired in late May 1989. An elected rank-and-file strategy committee planned activities and prepared flyers and timeframes. We started in December with a day of mourning for laid-off AT&T workers, asking our members at AT&T and US West to wear black

ribbons to work on Pearl Harbor Day. This was a chance to educate our members about the way AT&T was expanding management jobs while decimating craft ranks.

Shortly after that, we started our contract campaign. We did a bargaining survey, using the mobilization structure. The survey gave a short history of bargaining, asked for members' bargaining priorities, and then asked what people were willing to do to support negotiations: wear buttons, T-shirts, talk to co-workers, phone bank, etc. This helped identify more potential mobilization coordinators and made people think about how good contracts are won. From the survey, the top three bargaining priorities were health care benefits, employment security and a decent wage.

In March we asked our AT&T members to sign postcards addressed to AT&T CEO Bob Allen, saying they supported the union in negotiations on our three key issues. Tens of thousands of these postcards were taken to the bargaining table in New Jersey when negotiations were opened April 4. On the same day, we asked our members to show their colors and wear red to work. We also leafletted and conducted informational pickets in all the major cities.

As bargaining progressed, we received extensive daily bargaining reports, which we got out to the members through Mobilization. We had meetings at every worksite to take the strike authorization vote, thereby obtaining much higher participation, with 90% voting to authorize a strike. Members knew what the issues were and were willing to do whatever it took to get a good contract.



Kraig Scattarella

On May 17 we organized Health Care Action Day. By this time, AT&T had made its health care proposal, which included 61 take-back demands. On Health Care Action Day, we asked everyone to wear red (our "Take a Stand" T-shirts, if they had them) and to wear a bandaid and our sticker which said, "Cutting our Health Benefits is a Sick Idea." It was a fun day. Some of our members wore bandages or came to work with crutches. Jeannie Powell, CWA's Area Vice President for AT&T, brought a blood pressure kit and took blood pressures. We got eight nonmembers to join that day, some of whom had refused to join for 30 years.

Mother's Day—traditionally the busiest day of the year for long distance phone service—was our next mobilization event. In speed-conscious AT&T, we asked all our operators to put courtesy before speed in order to wish all the mothers at AT&T a "Happy Mother's Day." That same week we asked every member to call AT&T CEO Bob Allen, collect and person-to-person, and let him know we wanted no cuts in our benefits. This is part of the electronic picket line strategy, which we would have used more extensively had we been unable to reach agreement. By 11 am that day, AT&T had put a restriction against collect calls on Bob's phone number. We had definitely made our presence known.

The contract expired on Saturday night of Memorial Day weekend. The day before, we staged an informational picket in front of our largest building. We had a good crowd and good support from our US West members. Everyone wore red and we had fun chanting. ("From Eastern Air to AT&T, corporate greed is plain to see" was my favorite.) We finished picketing at 1 pm and when everyone went back to work, they stood up for justice at 1:15 Pacific Daylight Time. On the East Coast, it was 4:15 and workers were taking a stand there also. Across the country, every AT&T member stood at his or her work station at the same time for five minutes. In Portland, it went very well. In the operating office we had 97% participation. Jeannie Powell said that the operating office was quieter than she had ever seen it and that it gave her goosebumps. People could see their unity and resolve and power. Nationally, all locals reported more than 90% participation.

AT&T management got the message. Managers were calling in reports to the AT&T California Regional Office and, according to our national staff representatives, they had goosebumps too.

We also made it clear to AT&T that we were setting up an electronic picketline for our supporters to temporarily bypass the AT&T long distance network if we didn't get a settlement. By dialing 103-330, people could temporarily route their calls through Sprint.

On Saturday, the day the contract expired, there was a meeting

of all the Portland AT&T Worksite Coordinators and Picket Captains. They brainstormed ideas about what operators could do if we ended up working without a contract and using an inside strategy. (We felt this was the most likely scenario if we didn't reach a settlement.) That group of operators came up with some great ideas. They were going to make a set of buttons with just the letters A, B, C, D, E and F. The coordinators would wear a particular button on a particular day and particular activities would happen, ranging from standing up in waves around the office to everyone taking the wrong breaks and lunches. The activities would escalate from one day to the next.

We won. We settled on the day the contract expired, and we got a good contract. We fought off the health care concessions, keeping our benefits intact, and got AT&T to agree to work with us in a coalition to fight for national health care reform. We also got landmark child care and elder care provisions, 9.5% over three years in our base wages and profit-sharing, and improvements in our employment security language. But the most important thing we got was our members' understanding that it was their unity and work that won the contract.

1989 US West Bargaining

1989 bargaining at US West meant combining the Pacific Northwest Bell, Mountain Bell and Northwestern Bell contracts to form a single US West contract. The Pacific Northwest contract covered our members in Oregon and Washington and was the best of the three contracts in terms of wages and most contract language.

In the US West contract campaign, our mobilization experience was similar to our experience at AT&T, but there were some important differences. One was that AT&T's mobilization was planned by an elected committee, by national staff in Washington, D.C., and by the union's AT&T office in New Jersey. At US West, no one was really taking on the planning for the contract campaign. Some of us in Oregon and Washington were concerned about this, so we put together a district-wide conference call of Mobilization Coordinators. We sent out a letter and made follow-up phone calls, and in early January 1989 we had 30 locals participate in a conference call. We continued to have conference calls and got the International staff in Denver involved. We ended up with a self-selected group of local Mobilization Coordinators joined by some local presidents, who planned actions and encouraged the locals to participate.

In January we did the same kind of bargaining survey we had

done at AT&T and got a very similar response. The top three issues in every telecommunications contract were wages, health care and employment security. Again, the survey helped us identify other potential mobilization coordinators.

In February we did our first district-wide action. February 24 was Team Award Day and we asked everyone to wear buttons that said "We Want Our COLA Back." The "Team Award" was the lump sum payment that folks got instead of a wage increase and is based in part on how well US West did on its customer service and financial objectives. Everyone had complained about the Team Award for the last two years because management got a much higher percentage, because lump sums are taxed at a higher rate, and because it was a sorry replacement for a decent raise. People loved wearing the COLA buttons and were really hopeful about turning it all around in these negotiations. That month we also educated our members one-on-one about why a base wage increase is preferable to lump sum payments.

In March we collected shareholder proxies. Almost everyone who works for US West owns stock under the company's Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP). CWA District Vice President Walter Maulis went to the shareholders' meeting May 5 with the proxies we had collected, and read a statement encouraging the shareholders to support the union in bargaining. Proxy collection was frustrating as a mobilization activity because we were dealing with US West's timeframe instead of our own. A lot of members didn't get their proxies until after we had sent what we'd collected to the CWA's District Office in Denver, and it was difficult for the coordinators to keep asking again and again if members had received their proxies and reminding them to bring them in. On the other hand, many more members read the company's financial statement as a result of this activity, and nonmembers and even a few managers also gave us their proxies.

June 13 was the first day of bargaining. We celebrated with green balloons and ribbons that said, "We want our fair share, not Hot Air." People loved them. On June 30 we had Clean Record Unity Day (CRUD). We had little stickers printed that just said "CRUD," and we made a CRUD form that members filled out and gave to their managers requesting to view their personnel files and have any CRUD removed. It worked pretty well, though it was hard to get an accurate picture of how many managers actually complied with the requests.

By the last week in June, short hours in Operator Services had become a big issue at the table. Operators who work evening hours have traditionally worked six hours and been paid for eight. Each



Bill Scott

of the three contracts we were combining had a different provision for short hours. US West was proposing all operators work eight hours and was pushing hard on the issue. In one of the conference calls, we decided to stand up for short hours, so we made buttons that said "Save Our Shorts" and across the 14 states operators stood up all at the same time. We had 99% participation.

In mid-July we had our US West Health Care Day. Again we used the bandaids and stickers, and we had our members sign petitions asking for improvements instead of cutbacks in benefits. We had a record turnout for the strike authorization vote and continued to sign up long-time nonmembers. In early August our members, and many supportive nonmembers, wore "I'll Walk the Line in '89" buttons.

A week before the contract expired, we had a Worksite Coordinators meeting that overflowed the union hall. We spent most of the meeting talking about the final punch—Quality and Safety Week. We asked our members to do a *really* safe and excellent job, following every rule. We divided into groups by similar work and brainstormed about what this would mean in every job title, then got back together and shared ideas. This was a high point, hearing and helping people express their excellent ideas, seeing the enthusiasm and enjoyment build. There was more unity among people in different jobs than ever before.

August 11, the day before the contract expired, we again set up an informational picket and had lots of fun. We all got hoarse singing and chanting and members came up with great new chants. As at AT&T, people went inside and took a stand for justice. All that week we continued to sign people up as members. We were completely ready to strike if necessary.

It's harder to look at what happened next because we did have momentum, hope, a sense of power and high expectations. We didn't strike, we didn't use an inside strategy, and we didn't get a good contract. Combining the three contracts, especially for our members in the old Pacific Northwest territory, was much of the problem. The wage increase we got in this area left us behind inflation once again. We did save the evening operators' short hours and we held the line on health coverage, but the employment security language was not as good as we were used to.

The contract looked better to our members at Mountain Bell and Northwestern Bell because many of them got large wage increases to bring them up to the Pacific Northwest level. Because different groups of workers had different views of this settlement, a strike would not have been an effective weapon. But an inside strategy might have forced better wages and improvements in the employment security clause. Our members locally were unhappy with the contract and with the union's District Office for settling.

Our local organized a campaign to encourage members to vote no on the contract. We had buttons that said "Just Say No," we picketed, and we used the mobilization structure to encourage a no vote. The contract passed district-wide by 62.5%. Locally, we voted it down by 83% with a very high turnout, and we signed up more members on the basis of voting no.

Doing Better Next Time at US West

After the contract was ratified, we had to deal with the feelings everyone had about it. After having developed such high expectations through the mobilization, we were worried that our members would resign in droves, that apathy would be worse than before. That didn't happen. We only had one member resign because of the contract.

We organized a letter-writing campaign to our District Vice President, hoping to let our members vent their frustration. The letters and a petition asked for changes in the bargaining process. We asked for an elected rank-and-file mobilization committee to plan activities, to provide a clearer structure for ongoing membership input in bargaining, and to work more closely with the bargain-

ing teams. We also asked that the bargaining committees have more direct contact with the workplace during bargaining. This is a hard thing to do in a contract covering 40,000 people in 14 states, but we feel that if bargaining teams participate in mobilization activities on a regular basis, they'll have a better sense of how the members feel. We asked that the District also investigate a faster turn-around time on ratification: a month between tentative agreement and ratification means that momentum is gone.

We got our elected rank-and-file mobilization committee. We have one person for every state who is responsible for getting information to all the locals and bringing information back to the District.

It has been about a year and a half since the US West contract was settled, and we are continuing to mobilize. Besides several nationally coordinated events (Spring Unity Day and Health Care Action Day), our Oregon locals have focused on the issue of repetitive motion syndrome. We applied for and received a \$27,000 grant from Oregon OSHA to do education on repetitive strain injuries. Most of our Mobilization Coordinators have been trained and are training their co-workers on basic information about ergonomics, injuries and prevention. Just this basic information is empowering; work groups have started to demand better equipment.

Our union is changing in very positive ways because of Mobilization. Based on the experience of the 1989 contract campaign, work groups now often use mobilization tactics to resolve problems. Currently, a letter-writing and black armband campaign is being used to fight for a better vacation schedule in one of the business offices. There is a petition being circulated at AT&T to resolve a problem with hours.

During 1989 we increased our local membership by about 10% and trained many more leaders. We continue to push for better communication on all levels and for more control over the bargaining process. The mobilization structure is intended to be strong enough to provide for *quick* two-way communication with every member. We need to be able to use it for input in decisions such as reaching a tentative agreement. We have to be constantly strengthening the structure so we can turn to coalition-building, the electronic picket line and other strategies to increase our strength.

With mobilization we are turning a corner. We are becoming a truly mass-based organization rather than one in which 30 or 40 people try to take responsibility for serving a membership of 3,000. If we take the momentum we've built and use it, things will never be the same in our union. ■