

AT&T WORKER CONTRACTS EXPIRE BUT WORK DOESN'T STOP – IS IT THE LULL BEFORE THE STORM?



Following talks that ended late on Saturday, between union representatives and AT&T, an impending strike was temporarily averted, when around 40,000 AT&T landline employees, consented to continue work, without contracts. The workers contracts expired over the weekend raising the likelihood of a strike. Four contracts in Eastern, Midwestern and Western areas covering about 40,000 workers have expired. Ivan Smith, an Attorney at a law firm said, "In general, the strike is the last thing a union wants. If the employer can withstand a strike, you lose all the leverage you had." However, the Communication workers of America and the workers said that they would continue with negotiations on a new deal. Candice Johnson, a spokeswoman for the workers union, said that she did not know how long it would take to reach an agreement, but hopefully concluded, "Everyone wants to get this done soon." An AT&T spokesman, Marty Richter, confirmed that talks were continuing. He had said earlier, that the company was in preparedness and conscious of the possibility for a strike for two years. "Managers and vendors would step in to keep phone service running if there was a walkout," he added. Till then the employees will continue to receive the same wages and benefits as before. However, if the negotiations break down and they fail to reach an agreement, they still have the option to call for a walkout. AT&T, continues to shed jobs, given the decline of the landline market and is shifting its focus on wireless. This is serious cause for concern amongst the workers in the company. Other issues in the discussions are job-protection clauses, co-payments and health-care premiums. AT&T wants the employees to bear more of their ever-increasing health-care costs and more freedom in slimming down its shrinking landline operations. Some worker contracts have additional job-security clauses that guarantee them jobs at different parts of the company if they are laid off. The Union organizers say that the company is the largest and most profitable company in the communications industry, having posted a profit of \$4 billion in the last financial year, suggestive of the company not having financial constraints in meeting worker concerns. The CWA says, that the company should continue to "provide good, middle class jobs and not taking the low road of outsourcing, layoffs and cost shifting in order to meet competitive challenges." The company and the workers were at similar crossroads, three years ago. Then also the parties kept talking beyond the contract expiration and issues were resolved, without a strike, to the satisfaction of both parties. More than half of its 256,000 strong workforce are union members, making it the country's largest employer of unionized members.