

Telstra workers defy the odds!

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Telstra workers have been engaged in major strikes and industrial action for over 6 months, to win a new enterprise agreement and to win some very basic worker rights.

Telstra workers are fighting, and have fought against huge odds. They have been hammered by over 12 years of reactionary, anti-worker laws and actions of the Howard/Costello Government, and they have witnessed little or no relief over the life of the Rudd Government.

On top of all this, the Telstra management of CEO Sol Trujillo and Chairman Donald McGauchie (now pushed out of the company by shareholders), refused to negotiate with Telstra workers' unions, while they engaged in a major campaign to de-unionise the workforce.

Campaign spanning two years

Telstra workers have been campaigning for a union negotiated EBA for nearly 12 months, and if you include time preparing for the campaign, (the planning, the tactical considerations, the membership meetings, the policy development, etc), then the campaign has gone on for over two years.

Telstra workers have won many EBAs over the years,

and on a number of occasions they have had to resort to industrial action to secure a good agreement. However, this EBA campaign was destined to be nothing like anything they have ever witnessed before.

Relentless campaign of destruction by management

This is the Telstra workers first EBA under the WorkChoices laws of the Howard Government. Their first EBA in a fully privatised Telstra and the first EBA under the US corporate management "crash through" style of CEO Sol Trujillo and his "amigos".

Worse still, the Telstra workers have had to fight in conditions made enormously difficult by over 12 years of Howard Government, reactionary, oppressive, anti worker legislation, and a fundamentalist anti-union corporate management, absolutely committed over that whole period, to the de-unionisation of a highly unionised corporation.

What have Telstra workers been through over that period? To summarise:

- The full privatisation of the company
- Over 50 thousand Telstra workers have been made redundant
- Two thirds of the workforce is on individual Australian Workplace Agreements. Most of them have been forced/tricked/deceived on to these agreements

- Many of their experienced

workplace representatives (shop stewards, delegates etc), have been made redundant and/or otherwise forced out by targeted bullying and victimisation

- Through devices like an unregulated performance management regime and the threat of mass job losses, workers have been working in a climate of fear and intimidation

- Approximately 20,000 of their jobs have been outsourced to contracting companies and sub contractors who the employer uses as a bypass workforce to undermine and drive down Telstra workers' wages and conditions

Refusal to negotiate by Telstra management

As if all of this wasn't enough, Telstra's corporate management refused to negotiate an Enterprise Agreement with the union, because the union has steadfastly refused to accept what is known as Telstra's "Part A/Part B" model.

The Part A/Part B model establishes two classes of workers in the company: Part A for current workers and part B for all new workers and workers coming off individual AWA contracts in the future and who wish to move to the award and union-negotiated collective agreement.

Part B contains inferior conditions and replicates AWA conditions (e.g. no guaranteed annual pay increases,

performance pay, weekly hours averaged over 12 months etc).

This is Telstra's strategy for getting around the Rudd Government's laws outlawing new AWAs. The CEPU could never accept such an unfair, unacceptable proposal without a fight.

The drive to finish unionisation in Telstra

As a result of Telstra's continuing refusal to negotiate a new EBA, Telstra workers voted overwhelmingly (by over 90.2 percent) to implement an industrial/strike campaign to win a decent agreement. That campaign began on the 13th of December 2008. Since then, except for a couple of weeks over the Xmas/New Year break period, Telstra workers have been applying strike action ranging from 4, 24, 48 hour and indefinite stoppages rolling from work group to work group, and various bans and limitations of work.

Not all Telstra workers can have a major impact on Telstra's operations quickly, so those workers, apart from taking some limited action, are contributing to a fighting fund to help sustain their workmates who are taking more substantial strike and other industrial action.

Telecommunications is automated and therefore Telstra workers are taking targeted action in key and strategic parts of the business. Some of them have been out on strike for extended periods. The struggle has been long and difficult.

If that wasn't enough, at the same time Telstra's anti-union ideologues in management have been working feverishly to try to roll out non-union collective contracts to Telstra employees in small and large parts of the business. Telstra has been attempting to pressure, bribe, and deceive employees into their Part A/Part B non union contracts, for over 12 months, with only limited success. They hoped, by offering 4.5 percent, 4 percent and 4 percent over 3 years, and by holding out from agreeing to a union negotiated agreement, that they could eventually break the Telstra workers' resistance and have

them pick up management's third rate, non-union agreement. This strategy has been steadfastly rejected by the unionised workers in Telstra.

This is an epic struggle

Telstra workers are fighting an epic struggle. The issues at the centre of their struggles are issues fundamental to all Australian workers. Those issues are:

- the right to a union negotiated agreement
- the right to be properly represented by a union
- the right to compulsory arbitration so the employer is no longer the judge, jury and executioner.
- to push back WorkChoices AWAs, by workers having the right to transfer from the AWA, to the Award/EBA, before their AWAs expire (In most cases in Telstra that expiry date is 2012)
- the traditional struggle to protect current conditions of employment, a reasonable wage increase, and to improve their workplace rights, much eroded during the life of the Howard Government

Telstra workers deserve public support, because in fighting for their own collective interests, they are fighting for the interests of all workers.

In the last few weeks the disastrous Trujillo/McGauchie leadership of Telstra has ended with both men forced out by shareholders. Telstra workers' resistance played its part in this development.

The new leadership of Telstra has agreed to negotiate a new agreement for Telstra workers, through their unions. This in itself is a major breakthrough for Telstra workers.

In response, the CEPU has agreed to a temporary suspension of strikes and other industrial action to allow the talks to proceed.

Time will tell, whether Telstra management is genuine in its declaration of a new direction.

Telstra workers stand ready to fight on if necessary. A decent union based agreement has yet to be won, and if necessary, fight on they will.

