

Sara Steffens Responds to CWA 7250



CWA 7250 Question #1:

Last year our Local organized a major campaign to keep the Work from Home (WFH) option at AT&T. Our members found that WFH was safer, saved them money on commuting and childcare, gave them more time with their families and more time for rest, and more control of their work space. With the help of a few other Locals, we were able to organize actions, press conferences, a petition with over 8,000 signatures, and major media attention. We didn't get much support from the CWA national or districts though, and we were unable to win WFH for our Legacy T Call center Workers in Minneapolis.

What was with the disconnect between the Union and our members' urgent demand to keep WFH? Going forward, how can we win good WFH jobs and maintain a strong internal union organization?

Sara Steffens Responds:

I know some CWA leaders still worry about the potential long-term effects of working from home on our union and our communities. But working from home is a major quality-of-life benefit, as important as pay and job security, for our members in jobs where it's possible — and that's true as well for our CWA staff, many of whom now have hybrid work assignments. And CWA members including passenger service agents and journalists successfully worked from home long before the pandemic and remained strong union members.

So, it's time to listen to members and get real: Instead of clinging to what used to be, we need to help our members advocate for the priorities they identify on bargaining surveys, including working from home.

We need to collect and share best practices for work from home, including model contract language on critical issues like new hire data and orientations, remote surveillance, equipment reimbursement and callback protections. CWA must build systems to support hybrid and home-based workers and units, including funding home visits, organizing blitzes, electronic membership cards, virtual union boards and other strategies to ensure that our union density and activism remains strong.

CWA 7250 Question #2:

The experience of our Local and many others across the union is that we wait months and months - sometimes over a year - for grievances to be heard at District/National level. This lack of movement stalls any momentum and lets management know they can deny at first step and then it will effectively disappear. It's not uncommon for workers to leave the job while waiting for grievances to be resolved. This only breeds frustration, distrust and cynicism among rank & file members towards the union.

*What can be done to aggressively expedite grievance movement? Would you support an *expectation* that grievances are heard within 60 days at the higher levels?*

Sara Steffens Responds:

I support an expectation that grievances at higher levels should be handled within 60 days; we also need to clean up the backlog and identify what's been causing the delays.

Transparency increases accountability for everyone involved: Going forward, all grievances assigned to CWA staff should be tracked and monitored for timeliness. Members and Locals should always be kept up-to-date on the status of their grievances.

Of course, even when we do our part, some grievances will take more than 60 days – for instance, when they are part of a larger collective bargaining process, or where an employer is unresponsive and requires more aggressive measures.

CWA 7250 Question #3:

We are bleeding members at AT&T and DirecTV. The company has whittled down union presence to only 20% of its retail stores, more and more tech work is being outsourced and our Legacy T and DirecTV Call Centers face heavy attrition with no new hiring.

What can we do to stop the bleeding?

What is your plan to organize the unorganized sectors of AT&T and DirecTV?

What is your overall plan to build the Union?

Sara Steffens Responds:

The only way to protect our jobs is to build our power at AT&T.

Building the leverage we need must be a national project across our contracts and job titles including workplace mobilization, public campaigns, shareholder actions, political pressure and more.

Organizing nonmembers and non-union shops is key: We must build our density in every open shop, with resources available to Locals that need help signing up nonmembers, and accountability for those that do not care to take on this work.

AT&T needs to see that wherever they move our work, we will follow – starting by organizing authorized retailers and contractors. Every store that votes to join CWA helps us represent all our AT&T members. And there's never been a better time to do this work, with retail workers' interest in unions at its highest level in decades and the NLRB allowing workers to create bargaining units at the store level.

Internally, we need to build our steward structure, commit to training members and working the CWA Strong program, and double down on our efforts to build CWA membership and union density in the overarching telecom, tech and media sector.

Everything we do CWA leaders should be aimed at building power for our members. And we know that our organizing model works: Since 2019, more than 25,000 workers have joined CWA.

CWA 7250 Question #4:

Open bargaining means that contracts are negotiated with transparency for the membership that will have to live under them. Open bargaining lets the members see what we are fighting for at the bargaining table and what the companies are trying to low-ball or take away. In Minnesota, the Nurses union and the Minneapolis Teachers union are using open bargaining and have won major gains.

Will you support expanding open bargaining for CWA contracts?

What would you do to make Open Bargaining the "norm" in CWA?

Sara Steffens Responds:

I support open bargaining when it's needed to hold employers accountable, to increase member engagement or to build trust between workers and their bargaining representatives. It's particularly useful in situations like bargaining kickoff, or where an employer's asks are egregiously offensive. Our union is stronger when our members participate in bargaining.

But open bargaining is never an end in itself – it's one among many tools to engage members and increase our leverage at the table. Productive bargaining also requires that we keep channels open to find common ground and reach timely agreement. Just getting the membership mad is never enough – we always need a well-constructed plan to win a fair and equitable contract.

CWA 7250 Question #5:

CWA brags about its power and influence within the political system - especially the Democratic Party - but when politicians stab workers in the back (like Biden did with the railroad union workers) there is little said or done.

Meanwhile Trump and the fascist right organize using fake-populist rhetoric and are a serious threat to unions and the community.

Do either party really represent working-class interests?

Are Corporate politicians any real protection against fascist threats?

Why should we continue to pour millions of dollars and time and energy into corporate-controlled politicians?

What percentage of movement building should be put into efforts outside of the political system?

Sara Steffens Responds:

Corporate Democrats have too long blocked real gains for workers – including those who have failed year after year to stand for workers’ rights, labor law reform and democracy. I support the pledge of the CWA Executive Board to not give a single dollar to any politician who does not support the PRO Act or the other core issues critical to our members – and I’ve carried that warning in person to the House Democratic Caucus.

But we are still better off with pro-worker politicians in charge.

For example: Democrats repealed Michigan’s so-called “right-to-work” laws, while GOP-controlled Florida has launched an all-out attack on our CWA members in the public sector. In Minnesota, the Democratic Farmer Labor party (DFL) has banned captive audience meetings. Every election has real consequences for our members. If unions and working people sit out, corporations push to revoke even more of our rights in ways that can reverberate for generations. And the attacks hit hardest for those with the least power historically: women, people of color, immigrant families and LGBTQIA+ communities.

So, it’s not an either/ or, but a yes/ and: We have to live in the world we have while we build the world we want and need.

Biden isn’t perfect, but he gave us a card-carrying union member as Labor secretary, and appointed the most pro-worker NLRB General Counsel ever, former CWA attorney Jennifer Abruzzo, who is fighting every day to defend workers’ rights in unprecedented ways.

No single politician can fix our broken democracy, voting rights and labor law. True and lasting reform requires a broad-based movement of working people standing with our siblings who are fighting for racial, economic and climate justice – including direct action whenever necessary.

CWA 7250 Question #6:

The strike is the traditional weapon of the working-class - and the method where we have won most of our benefits and rights - but some union leaders seem afraid to use it, or even plan for it. At a time when striking workers were winning significant gains our AT&T Legacy T contract was extended without a strike vote, and the DTV and Mobility Orange contracts were settled without a strike vote, and at the 2021 CWA Convention a resolution to simply research and plan for a strike at AT&T was ruled unconstitutional. AT&T has CWA divided up into a dozen different contracts with different expiration dates - we are divided, they are ruling.

What would you do to overcome the division of AT&T and DirecTV workers into different contracts?

The Civil Rights movement often defied unjust laws to win justice for the community - would you be willing to challenge unjust labor laws that handcuff workers the same way?

Sara Steffens Responds:

Regardless of expiration dates, we must build solidarity and mobilize our members across bargaining units at AT&T and other common employers, with the understanding that we are truly stronger together.

Strikes are our strongest weapon, but must always begin with a clear plan to win and to return members to work. Our readiness to strike depends on full buy-in from all affected units.

I'm always ready and willing to get in "good trouble" when our freedom is at stake – and that includes our freedom to organize and act collectively as union members. Where our current labor laws are stacked against workers, we must fight by every means we have, including challenging unjust laws and even risking arrest.

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