

# Striking NYNEX

■ *Steve Early*

The four-month strike by 60,000 telephone workers at NYNEX in 1989 was one of the largest and most significant anti-concession struggles of the decade.

In an era when many unions have lost highly publicized contract fights and been forced to make give-backs, the NYNEX strikers successfully resisted management demands that they pay hundreds and eventually thousands of dollars a year for their medical coverage. They also defeated the company's drive for new forms of "flexible compensation" designed to replace base wage increases and COLAs with lump-sum payments and profit-sharing.

Successful union resistance to these concessions would not have been possible without an unprecedented pre-strike program of membership education and internal organizing. The contract campaign conducted by the 30 NYNEX local unions within the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and their allies in NYNEX units represented by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) reflects CWA's nationwide commitment to rank-and-file mobilization through the "one-on-one" approach.

The tactics and strategies used during the strike—and the 18

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months of preparation that preceded it—illustrate how union staff, local leaders, and rank-and-file activists can work together in a large regional bargaining unit to overcome the organizational weaknesses that have proved fatal in many other fights against give-backs during the 1980s. While the strike itself exacted a great financial and human toll, the mobilization process that enabled NYNEX workers to maintain solidarity and win a new contract has changed and strengthened the way many local unions operate on an ongoing basis

Large numbers of stewards, chief stewards, and local officers who served as "mobilization coordinators" in 1988-89 now understand the importance of systematic internal organization, education, and membership participation—not only for future contract campaigns but also in local union efforts to organize the unorganized, achieve labor's political goals, and deal with contract issues outside the narrow framework of grievance and arbitration procedures.

Many activists within CWA's NYNEX unit clearly remain more comfortable with the traditional roles of stewards, local officers and staff representatives in the "servicing model" of unionism. But there is far greater acceptance of the need for "organizing model" initiatives like one-on-one workplace canvassing and recruitment of volunteers, systematic distribution of steward newsletters and other union literature, issue-oriented shopfloor activity from button-wearing to informational picketing, alliances with other unions and community organizations, and a more adversarial stance toward management during the life of the contract.

This article describes how CWA District 1 prepared for 1989 bargaining in a manner quite different than in the past. Coordinated bargaining and strike unity of CWA and IBEW were major factors in the final outcome of the strike. But without the internal restructuring and intensive pre-expiration program of membership activity initiated by CWA, neither union would have been able to withstand management pressure for an unfavorable settlement.

### **Why Mobilization Was Needed At NYNEX**

Our 1989 conflict with NYNEX had its roots in the failure of union solidarity three years earlier.

CWA represents only two-thirds of the 60,000 unionized employees at NYNEX, primarily at its New York Tel subsidiary; the IBEW represents the rest, mainly in New England. In 1986, local leaders of the two unions agreed to jointly resist any health care cost shift-

ing demands, but at the last moment of 1986 bargaining, IBEW's NYNEX bargaining council capitulated on the issue and then sat out a 9-day CWA strike over it. The IBEW negotiated a controversial "me-too" agreement, protecting its members from premium contributions only if CWA successfully resisted them.

The settlement CWA reached with NYNEX under these circumstances was a source of future trouble. During the life of the unions' 1986-89 contract, no CWA or IBEW members would make premium contributions or pay higher deductibles. But if the company's actual medical plan costs exceeded a certain amount in 1988, the contract stipulated that NYNEX employees would start to pay the difference on August 6, 1989—the first day of the next three-year contract.

The choice of this date clearly reflected CWA's position that the whole issue was up for renegotiation in 1989 bargaining. NYNEX, on the other hand, mistakenly assumed that cost shifting was a "done deal" for 1989-92. Therefore, it refused to participate in any meaningful health care cost containment discussions during the life of the contract. And it tried to sugarcoat cost shifting for thousands of its managers—who began paying for their benefits in 1986—by telling them that bargaining unit employees would soon be contributing to their coverage as well.

For the company, the only unresolved question in 1989 was *how much* CWA and IBEW members would pay under their new contract. CWA's defense of the 100% company-paid coverage its members had enjoyed since 1970 required the dismantling of cost-shifting mechanisms already being put into place.

By 1989, of course, the bargaining climate on health care issues had only gotten worse. NYNEX could now point to dozens of other major companies that required larger co-payments, deductibles or premium contributions to shift the burden of medical cost inflation to their employees. Firms like NYNEX that provided fully-paid coverage were increasingly rare.

The lost strike and concession bargaining trends of the 1980s also cast a shadow over the union's 1989 talks. Both NYNEX and CWA were well aware of the weakness of the four-week national walkout by 150,000 CWA members at AT&T in 1986. Like the briefer strike at NYNEX that year, CWA had been undermined by the IBEW's acceptance of a "me-too" deal, keeping their AT&T members—a quarter of the unionized workforce—on the job while CWA struck. Worse, by the end of the walk-out nearly 25% of the workers represented by CWA were scabbing as well. The company was able to use its high degree of automation and large management workforce to maintain long distance telephone ser-

vice with very little apparent disruption. As a result, AT&T workers lost their cost-of-living clause (and have yet to regain it).

To avoid a repetition of this setback—which was a real possibility in 1989, even in the more homogeneous and militant CWA NYNEX unit—the union had to have a more effective game plan for fighting back. Membership mobilization—through education, agitation and stronger internal organization—was the key to that plan.

### **Getting the Mobilization Started**

Planning for 1989 began at a December 1987 meeting of officers from all CWA NYNEX locals convened by International Vice-President Jan Pierce, the administrative director of the union's District 1. With few exceptions, the participants agreed that CWA's 1986 mobilization activity at NYNEX had been too little, too late—and definitely not sufficient to prepare the membership for anything other than the short work stoppage that ensued.

In 1986, as the strike deadline approached, there had been some informational picketing, distribution of one piece of literature on possible strike issues, and some sporadic last-minute experimentation with "working to rule." These efforts had been coordinated by a hastily assembled mobilization committee that included representatives from only a handful of NYNEX locals. There was no formal coordinated bargaining arrangement with the IBEW and no joint membership activity or mobilization plan.

Overall, there had been too much of a traditional and exclusive focus on what happened at the bargaining table—as opposed to away from it. There was not enough information disseminated about the status of negotiations and no grassroots membership force to back up the union's negotiators in hundreds of NYNEX workplaces.

To ensure that that did not happen again in 1989, the NYNEX local presidents set up a regional committee of mobilization coordinators—one from each local. In smaller locals, the president usually played this role; in larger ones, where the president was likely to be directly involved in negotiations, another officer or executive board member was picked. Meeting on a monthly basis starting 18 months before the contract was up, the local coordinators began to identify rank-and-file members, stewards and chief stewards willing to act as building and work group coordinators in each local. The goal was to recruit one mobilization activist for every ten bargaining unit members so that there would be an effective, face-to-face communications network throughout the contract campaign and, eventually, a unit-wide "Committee of 4,000"



engaged in mobilization activity.

Each local was responsible for providing District 1 headquarters with the names, home addresses and work locations of all mobilization volunteers. (A total of about 3,000 ended up on the mailing list.) This expansion and strengthening of the union's existing steward network took many months but was absolutely essential because all later activity—whether one-on-one surveying about contract issues, literature distribution, or workplace displays of solidarity—could not have been carried out without many more activists in place.

The first task of the coordinators, in the Spring of 1988, was to solicit stock proxies from thousands of members so a union delegation could attend NYNEX's annual meeting and make a strong bargaining-related statement. In this initial and unprecedented effort, almost 7,000 workers signed their proxies over to the union; a year later, after widespread one-on-one training, better list-keeping and more systematic internal organizing work, the number of employee/shareholders who participated in CWA's 1989 proxy solicitation drive almost doubled.

Beginning in the summer of 1988—a full 12 months before negotiations began—District 1 staff held special training sessions in each local for mobilization coordinators. The training focused on the nuts-and-bolts of internal organizing (how to overcome apathy, get people involved, give them things to do, etc.) and contract campaign tactics and strategies employed by other unions in industries where labor's traditional economic weapon—the

strike—has been undermined by automation, scab-herding, and other management counter-measures. The message was clear: CWA members had to wage a Wobbly-style "inside campaign" that generated sufficient pressure on NYNEX to settle or, in the event of a strike, helped make the work stoppage as effective as possible. Also discussed in detail was the possibility of departing from the union's traditional "no contract, no work" stance and working without a contract after expiration—a sometimes controversial option ultimately rejected by CWA's regional bargaining committee.

While this educational process continued in the Fall of 1988, diplomatic relations with the IBEW were resumed. After a series of meetings involving local and international officials on both sides, the two unions agreed to seek joint bargaining with NYNEX in 1989. If the company refused (which it did), IBEW and CWA agreed to coordinate their separate regional negotiations by presenting identical demands, maintaining close contact, and having representatives of the other union at each bargaining table. This major breakthrough was announced in January 1989 in the first issue of a monthly—and, later, more frequently published—*Mobilization Report* sent to all CWA coordinators and IBEW local leaders.

The *Mobilization Report* became an important tool for promoting ongoing contract campaign activity and keeping coordinators informed about the progress of bargaining. In early 1989, for example, it explained CWA's negotiating goals as developed by the regional bargaining council. Later bulletins highlighted examples of direct action on the job over local issues and rallied support for the union's second annual proxy solicitation drive.

### **The FACTS Campaign**

In conjunction with 10,000-member CWA Local 1101 in New York City, District 1 launched a "campaign-within-the-campaign" called FACTS—the Fight Against Cost Shifting. FACTS was a critical preemptive strike against management's attempt to make cost shifting an accomplished fact even before negotiations began on June 13. The company tried to do this by sending payroll deduction cards to all union-represented employees and urging them to authorize weekly premium payments (amounting to \$10.27 per member), effective August 6th. The company told all IBEW and CWA members that if they refused to make the new premium contributions, they would be immediately shifted to a "minimum medical plan" requiring large deductibles (\$500 individual and

\$1,500 family) for hospital care.

During the late winter and spring of 1989, the union's hundreds of mobilization coordinators engaged in systematic leafletting, workplace meetings, one-on-one discussions, and widespread wearing of FACTS buttons and stickers to win the credibility battle with management over the inevitability of cost shifting. On February 15, 1989, for example, thousands of CWA and IBEW members came to work wearing anti-cost shifting paraphernalia as part of a highly visible FACTS Day protest that included informational picketing at lunchtime. At an employee reception prior to the NYNEX annual meeting several months later, New York City locals turned out an angry crowd of 700 workers who personally confronted top officers of the company and forced them to retreat from the stage in disarray after a brief question-and-answer session about cost shifting.

When NYNEX began distributing the payroll deduction cards for premium sharing, mobilization coordinators systematically contacted fellow members in their work group and urged them to turn the cards in to the union, keeping close track of who did and who didn't. The vast majority of cards were then presented to management on the first day of bargaining as overwhelming evidence of worker opposition to the company's cost shifting demands. A potential pre-expiration rout on this key issue was thus transformed into a concerted workplace drive that sent management a message of solidarity and strength, rather than weakness and division.

After the FACTS phase of the campaign, coordinators promoted a variety of other workplace actions. On June 13—the first day of bargaining—all members were asked to report for work wearing red to show the company that "it's bargaining with all of us." Buttons, ribbons, hats, T-shirts, suspenders, and other color coordinated apparel created what one local officer called "a sea of red" in many offices. In some locals, workers continued to wear red every Thursday from the beginning of negotiations until the first week of August, when the strike began. Others stood in place at their work locations at a designated time, engaged in coordinated pencil-tapping while sitting at their desks, and participated in other small but annoying and increasingly disruptive gestures of solidarity. *Our Side of The Story*, a post-strike report on the NYNEX struggle prepared by District 1, describes what happened next:

"As expiration drew closer, we escalated our tactics. We picketed outside work locations before starting the work-day with signs that said 'Just Practicing,' and then marched

into work in unity. We worked to rule. We forgot our ID cards at major locations where cards must be presented to gain entrance.

"About ten days before expiration, we picketed with signs that said 'Just Practicing' and then marched in seven minutes late. We knew we'd struck a nerve at the company when, instead of docking employees for a quarter hour of lateness, nearly 100 were given one-day suspensions for participating in illegal job actions, and thousands more received warnings. In some locations, supervisors began to threaten workers with warnings and suspensions if they refused to stop tapping at their desks or standing in place."

One week before the contract expired, CWA mobilization coordinators and IBEW stewards staged simultaneous mass rallies in New York and Boston that helped focus greater public and media attention on the impending showdown with the company. The stage was set for the strike of '89 and—fortunately for those involved—18 months of mobilization had produced a membership more informed, united, and determined than ever before.

## **The Strike**

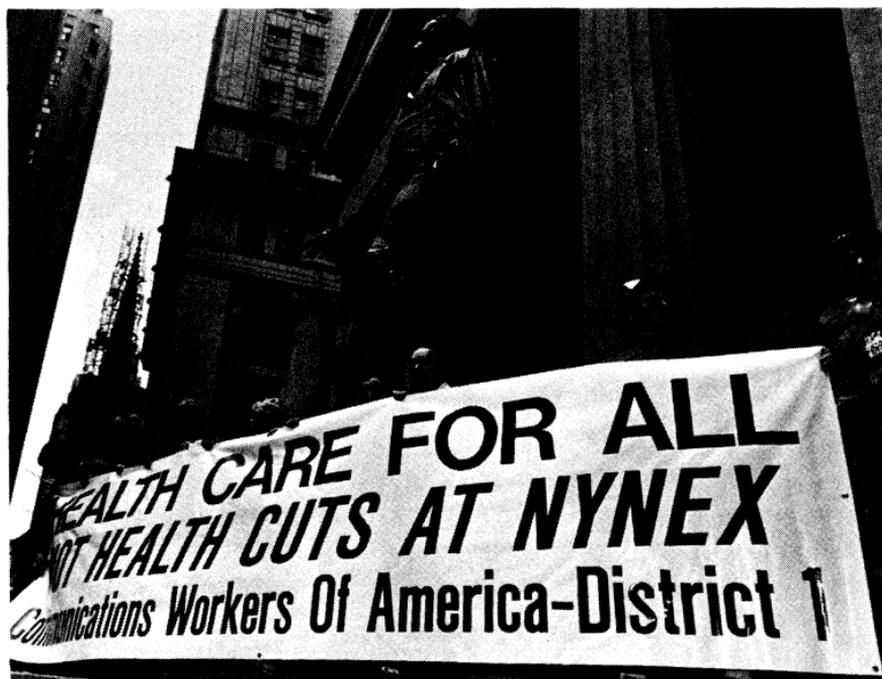
Some observers—inside and outside the union—have expressed well-founded doubts about the viability of traditional work stoppages in the telephone industry because of the length of time it takes to achieve the desired economic impact. According to its official post-mortem, CWA District 1 discovered "that it takes at least two months to really begin to hurt the company." But given the decision of the union's bargaining team to plunge ahead with an all-out walk-out in August 1989, mobilization enabled CWA's NYNEX locals to conduct a much higher impact strike than previous struggles.

One key difference from the past was the enormous amount of mobile and mass picketing employed in 1989, which required an unprecedented level of membership involvement in "following the work" and confronting the company in nontraditional ways. Instead of just politely walking on picketlines outside empty garages or office buildings where armies of managers, temps, and other nonunion employees were doing strikers' jobs, CWA used the mobilization structure to organize teams of strikers to aggressively pursue and picket hundreds of company vehicles wherever struck work was being performed in the field. In addition, regular

rank-and-file rallies, marches and car caravans were held at the homes of top NYNEX executives and retired managers called back to scab, at the hotels housing contract laborers brought in from other states, and at any public event involving the company or its officials.

The strikers' militance and creativity had its downside—hundreds of arrests and more than 250 strike-related suspensions and firings that were still being contested more than a year later. But their activities also raised the company's strike security costs and lowered its scab productivity and morale to unexpected levels. An internal NYNEX document complained that CWA and IBEW picketing was "the worst we have ever seen . . . the degree and intensity of harassment is devastating."

Ultimately, however, some of the unions' most effective pressure points proved to be away from struck workplaces—among consumers, utility regulators and state legislators. Here also, prior membership mobilization paid off handsomely. For several years before the strike, CWA had been using the one-on-one approach to involve more of its New York members in political action. NYNEX locals had engaged in several rounds of systematic grassroots lobbying on behalf of legislation that would restrict secret employer monitoring of employee telephone conversations with customers. While the union had not yet succeeded in get-



ting its "anti-bugging" bill through the Republican-controlled state Senate, CWA members had become well known among state politicians for their well-organized rank-and-file demonstrations, letter-writing, phone-calling, and "accountability sessions" with individual legislators.

Right in the middle of the strike, N.Y. Tel had the bad timing to seek a \$360 million rate hike from the state Public Service Commission (PSC). CWA strikers gathered 100,000 signatures on petitions opposing the increase and got 130 state legislators, over 60% of the total legislature, to sign full-page anti-rate hike ads in *The New York Times* and *Albany Times-Union*. CWA formed a coalition with religious, student, senior citizen and community organizations to intervene in the regulatory process. Press conferences featuring Jesse Jackson and Ralph Nader were held, and strikers distributed tens of thousands of pamphlets urging residential customers to "hang up" on NYNEX's attempt to double their monthly bills.

By the fourth month of the strike, the company realized it was facing a major defeat at the PSC and risking long-term disruption of its carefully cultivated relationships with politicians and regulators. In Massachusetts, meanwhile, a parallel IBEW effort to stall legislative action on the introduction of new charges for directory assistance was making a similar point about the potentially damaging role that either union could play in the political arena. CWA was ultimately so effective in blocking the N.Y. rate request that an ongoing program of regulatory activism is now an important part of the union's effort to develop new forms of bargaining leverage.

During the strike, the mobilization coordinators' network was also utilized to maintain contact with strikers and their families, attending to their individual financial needs through the CWA Defense Fund and the filing of claims for unemployment benefits and continued medical coverage. Scabbing was thus held to a minimum—even though employee medical benefits were cut off one month after the strike began and IBEW members had no national strike fund to draw on. Among CWA strikers, less than 1% of the membership crossed the picket line in 17 weeks. Local 1108 on Long Island, for example, had only one scab out of 1,525 members. In Albany Local 1118, even 80 of the local's 90 non-members participated in the entire strike. Without mobilization, these statistics would have been quite different.

### **Mobilization's Role in the Future**

The defeat of NYNEX's cost shifting demands in 1989 was

largely a defensive victory for IBEW and CWA. Their difficult fight to maintain the status quo with the company's medical plan did not resolve other critical issues involving the introduction of new technology, contracting out of bargaining unit work, or the maintenance of a union-free environment in NYNEX's fast-growing unregulated subsidiaries, where thousands of jobs are being created rather than eliminated. In addition, management seems intent on implementing health care cost shifting for retired workers, and even the active workforce may again face medical benefit concession demands in the next round of bargaining.

Few members of either IBEW or CWA will be eager to wage another long strike next year. CWA spent almost its entire \$16 million strike fund on the first eight weeks of the '89 strike and had to borrow another \$15 million from the Japanese telephone workers federation to finance the rest of it—a debt that will take several years to repay. So, financially, the union won't be in the best condition for a rematch in 1992.

Mobilization, however, continues to provide the union with an internal organizational framework for identifying and addressing these and other problems its NYNEX members face. In the 18 months since the 1989 settlement, educational work with the coordinators network and further coordination of NYNEX local union activity around contract issues have made it possible for many rank-and-filers to assess the lessons of the strike and how they might be applied to CWA's ongoing labor-management struggles.

District 1, for example, is still producing and distributing a *NYNEX Union Mobilization Report*, which now reaches about 5,000 CWA and IBEW activists. Recent editions have publicized



local union initiatives against contract labor, the need for management neutrality and card check recognition to aid recruitment of nonunion NYNEX workers, and the latest regulatory developments affecting both NYNEX employees and customers.

On the first anniversary of the strike, 100 IBEW and CWA officers and activists held an unusual day-long conference in Boston on union strategies for the future in the telephone industry. In workshops and plenary sessions, they evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the strike, debated alternative tactics and strategies for 1992, and compared notes on local union problems with contract enforcement.

Prior to the 1989 contract campaign, there was very little systematic or structured discussion of the union's strategic options, either within locals or as part of the periodic exchanges between NYNEX local presidents. In perhaps its most important and hopefully lasting contribution to the "culture of unionism" within NYNEX, mobilization has legitimized free-wheeling debate and constructive self-criticism of the sort that very rarely occurs at the local union level in American labor. Rather than just waiting for someone on high—either in the local or the international—to decide the union's approach to dealing with NYNEX, active members are being challenged to come up with their own answers to difficult policy questions and then share responsibility for implementing the new approaches decided upon.

The ability of CWA and IBEW to meet the challenges of 1992 very much depends on the further development of this process. If, for example, the unions choose to pursue a selective strike strategy next time, or a more intensive "in-plant" campaign as an alternative to striking, the job actions involved will require careful targetting, planning, and orchestration—a degree of organizational unity and flexibility far beyond that achieved in 1989. Only membership education and mobilization on an even wider scale will enable the unions to enter their next negotiations with new—and possibly more cost effective—weapons in their arsenal.

There is no greater testament to the future potential of mobilization than the fact that the mere mention of the term brings frowns to the faces of the company's labor relations representatives. When, they ask, is the union going to stop talking about mobilization? The strike is over, they say, and it's time for NYNEX and its unions to start building a "more mature relationship."

An informed, involved and aroused membership is, of course, seen as an impediment to such a relationship. But, for the NYNEX unions, it's their only hope of going beyond holding the line and resuming the forward motion of labor in the telephone industry. ■