

**We are
saying to
Northern
Telecom
management
that:**

**We don't want to
lose any more jobs.**

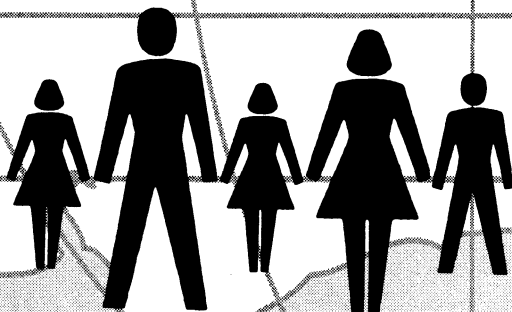
**We don't want to see
union jobs transferred
to non-union plants.**

*We want recognition
of our right to join a union
without fear of company in-
terference or reprisals and
to bargain collectively.*

**We don't want manage-
ment to listen in on our
conversations.**

**We want a safe
place to work.**

***We want to eliminate
all forms of discrimination
in the work place.***



Mobilizing Internationally

Global employee network pressures multinational to reverse anti-union strategy

■ *Larry Cohen*

Northern Telecom, a Canadian-based manufacturer of telecommunications equipment, seemed on the verge of notching another victory in its campaign to operate "union-free" in the U.S.A. It was July 1989, and the company had just replaced its 500 striking technicians after two weeks on strike. But just two months later, a combination of mass picketing and tremendous support from unionized Northern Telecom workers in Canada reversed the expected outcome. The workers—members of the Communications Workers of America—returned to work with the union intact.

Since the technicians' victory, CWA has deepened its working relationship with the Northern Telecom workers in Canada—and around the world. Unions in North America, Europe, and Asia, with the support of the International Metalworkers Federation and Postal Telephone and Telegraph International, have formed the Northern Telecom International Solidarity Coalition. Together, the "solidarity partners" represent 12,000 Northern Telecom employees from 11 different labor unions in eight nations, and millions of workers through the two trade secretariats.

The strengthening voice of Northern Telecom workers has led the multinational corporation to soften its anti-union strategy and

■ *Larry Cohen is Director of Organizing for the Communications Workers of America.*

improve its labor relations. While significant differences remain, information exchange has improved and the company is discussing global standards on employee practices and health and safety. These breakthroughs move us closer to our goal of negotiating a "code of conduct" at Northern Telecom which would ensure neutrality in organizing drives and an end to runaway plants and decertification efforts.

CWA's experience with Northern Telecom also holds vital lessons for mobilizing internationally at other multinational corporations. Corporate attempts to gain greater market share and profits, often at the expense of workers, can be stymied by taking a long-term strategy towards the company based on research and analysis, membership education and involvement, organizing, and international labor solidarity.

TAKING ON NORTHERN TELECOM

Northern Telecom manufactures, installs and services telecommunications equipment for virtually every market. Their primary customers are telecommunications giants such as Bell Canada and the Bell operating companies in the U.S. Today, 51% of Northern Telecom stock is owned by BCE, the holding company that owns Bell Canada. The remainder of the company stock is publicly traded.

The corporation's U.S. sales have steadily increased since the break-up of AT&T in 1984, and currently constitute its largest market. Northern's marketing strategy here relies heavily on the growing competition and diversity of interests between AT&T and its now divested Bell companies. Sales in eastern and southern Europe and in developing countries in Asia and Latin America are growing and important for future global market share.

Northern has also increased its manufacturing and maintenance capability in the United States for large telephone switches principally sold to telephone companies and smaller switches and telephone systems for businesses. Two years ago, Northern purchased most of a British telecom equipment manufacturer, STC, part of which will be sold to the French-based multinational, Alcatel. Earlier this year, Northern announced a multi-billion dollar agreement to provide telecom equipment and build manufacturing capability in China. Northern also produces equipment in Turkey, Malaysia, Mexico, China, Brazil and Australia.

This situation—multiple plants producing similar products in a variety of union and nonunion settings—is a tremendous threat to workers. Wage rates in Canada and Europe are higher than in the

United States, while labor costs in Mexico and Asia are as low as \$1.00 per hour. Of Northern's 20,000 U.S.-based employees, only about 1,000 are union-represented and members of CWA, while in Canada, 40% of its workers are in unions. Other Northern employees around the world have union rates somewhere between these figures (see chart). Without greater cooperation among employees, Northern would be able to shift production to any nonunion setting with impunity.

Teaming Up With Canada

Ten years ago, Northern Telecom management in the United States began to implement an aggressive anti-union strategy. Every negotiation was viewed by the company as an opportunity to decertify the union. Between 1984 and 1989, Northern Telecom campaigns decertified five out of seven CWA bargaining units. In several cases, Northern reconfigured bargaining units with help from the NLRB in order to get their majority. In Northern California, techs were forced to vote in three decertification efforts in four years as Northern bought and sold accounts and reconfigured operations in their determination to be "union-free." Techs were wined and dined, promised hefty raises with a merit pay plan and often forced to spend hours with supervisors discussing the benefits of decertification.

By the summer of 1989, CWA's largest remaining unit consisted of approximately 500 technicians in eight eastern states, members of Local 1109. Several months prior to contract expiration, mobilization of our 500 members began by establishing a technician network in each state. Twenty-five mobilization coordinators were trained, or one for every twenty technicians. Local 1109 issued periodic newsletters detailing Northern Telecom contract news.

As strong as our mobilization was, we knew that it was not sufficient against this multinational giant. CWA would need support from the Canadian telecommunications unions to save its members and halt Northern's anti-union game plan in the United States. Canadian unions had good reason to be concerned about the situation here: since the '80s, three major manufacturing facilities in Ontario were moved to the nonunion U.S. Not only would the involvement of Canadian employees of Northern Telecom step up the pressure, but the 18,000 union members employed at Bell Canada, Northern's majority owner, could provide additional leverage. As CWA continued to mobilize for the upcoming contract negotiations, we also initiated efforts to form a coalition of Northern Telecom employees in both countries.

In June, 1989, prior to the strike, a coalition was formally estab-

lished between the CWA, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), and the Communications Workers of Canada (now part of the Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers union, CEP). As stated in the Agreement,

The objective of the coalition shall be to provide a neutral atmosphere concerning labor relations in Northern Telecom workplaces in both Canada and the United States. In Canada, the chief concern has been closings and layoffs. In the United States, Northern Telecom has expanded employment while adopting an aggressive anti-union policy. Our ultimate goal will be to sign a pledge of neutrality with Northern Telecom agreeing not to oppose unionization and to agree to "card check" in organizing units in both countries. We should also seek an agreement as to locations of new facilities and maintenance of employment in existing ones.

As expected, Local 1109 could not reach an agreement with Northern Telecom in bargaining and engaged in three weeks of job actions designed to "wind the company down." Several weeks after the initial contract expiration date, the 500 members of Local 1109 struck the company. Almost immediately, Northern utilized replacements. Rather than concentrating our pickets at Northern Telecom work-sites, we began mobile mass picketing, often informational, of key businesses using Northern equipment. Local 1109 members rode

NORTHERN TELECOM: Number of Employees by Country, 1990

COUNTRY	NUMBER	PERCENT UNION
Canada	22,650	40%
United States	22,850	3%
United Kingdom	13,000	25%
Malaysia	2,600	0%
Turkey	1,640	30%
Brazil	300	100%
Ireland	300	100%
Australia	NA	NA
France	NA	NA
Mexico	NA	NA
Peoples Rep. of China	NA	NA
Thailand	NA	NA
TOTAL	64,890	21%

NOTE: Includes countries with significant manufacturing facilities owned by Northern Telecom. SOURCE: Company Annual Reports, Union estimates.

buses up and down the east coast for "Solidarity Rallies" at key customer locations.

Soon after the strike began on July 19, the Canadian unions made their interest known to Northern Telecom. Letters of support were sent from the two Canadian union presidents to the Northern Telecom chief executive officer stating that the Canadian unions would fully support the strike. Copies of the letters were distributed among the Northern technicians in the United States to boost morale. The Canadian unions then began grass-roots mobilization to support the strike. Two leaflets were put out in the Canadian manufacturing plants signed by all three unions. The second leaflet was titled, "Is it a coincidence?—The history of Northern Telecom's anti-worker, anti-union activities in the United States." The leaflet proposed that only our unity could stop the exporting of jobs to the United States and the related anti-union policy in the U.S. Strikers were sent to Canada to meet with Northern Telecom workers there.

The concerted actions produced results. CWA President Bahr received a letter from Northern Chair Paul Stern insisting that the company was not anti-union. At the end of the letter, Stern said, "As you are well aware, Northern Telecom and CWA are currently engaged in negotiations. Upon the conclusion of these negotiations and the return to work, I will welcome the opportunity to meet with you in Washington to discuss topics of mutual concern..."

The coalition at Northern Telecom continued to apply pressure at the grass-roots level in Canada and the United States. Fred Pomeroy, CWC president, even participated in contract negotiations in New York. There was growing interest in the Canadian press where Northern Telecom is considered the crown jewel of Canadian high-tech manufacturing. Headline stories appeared including "Unions Team up to Fight for Jobs at High-Tech Giant," "Unions Accuse Nortel of Union Busting in the United States," and "Our Love Affair with Northern Telecom Sours."

The strike was settled favorably, largely because of the Canadian help. Without it, our technicians would probably have been permanently replaced and the union decertified. Instead, everyone went back to work within three days of the settlement and replacement technicians were put on the bottom of the seniority list. "We realized the strike would be lost unless Northern's customers were impacted," commented Tony Matarazzo, now president of Local 1109. Matarazzo added, "The strike would have been lost, along with the union jobs, if we had picketed traditionally and not received Canadian support."

Cross-Border Pressure Mounts

The U.S.-Canadian solidarity partnership struck its next blow at Northern Telecom in 1990, when CWA received dramatic evidence of the systematic and illegal invasion of privacy by Northern Telecom in its manufacturing plant in Nashville, Tennessee. Copies of tape-recorded telephone conversations, wiretapped from pay phones in the employee cafeteria, were provided to the union by a former security officer in the plant. Additional tapes were made from listening devices in the sprinkler system. This surveillance had occurred for years and was apparently related to a broader effort to prevent unionization in the plant.

We held a press conference in Toronto, world headquarters of Northern Telecom, to publicize this issue in Canada. Bob White, then-president of the Canadian Auto Workers, Northern's largest union, hosted the event and was joined by Fred Pomeroy. The issue received extensive coverage on television, radio, and in the newspapers. Northern eventually agreed to settle the lawsuit, and in the process announced that it would be the first telecommunications firm in the U.S. to ban all secret electronic surveillance, including "legal" secret monitoring of employee work related calls. CWA later negotiated similar agreements with other firms.

At about the same time, Northern began to reverse its fanatical anti-union crusade in the U.S. Northern's Human Resources Director exchanged letters with CWA President Bahr committing that "respect, trust and mutuality of interest" would be the future basis for their approach to CWA. Since then, with continuing union pressure, Northern has continued to gradually improve labor relations policy in both union and unorganized locations.

Global Network Formed

In October 1991, the Canadian-U.S. labor coalition was expanded to Europe and Asia, when representatives of 11 labor organizations from eight countries, including Turkey and Malaysia, attended a coalition meeting in Toronto. The 150 participants—local leaders and activists in addition to international officers and staff—agreed to seek a global code of conduct, whereby Northern would respect the rights of its employees to organize without company interference. Additionally, the unions sought increased job security with an end to movement of work based on lower wage rates and union avoidance. For example, in Malaysia, Northern had an agreement with the government preventing unionization for at least five years.

Conference participants agreed to support these goals with an

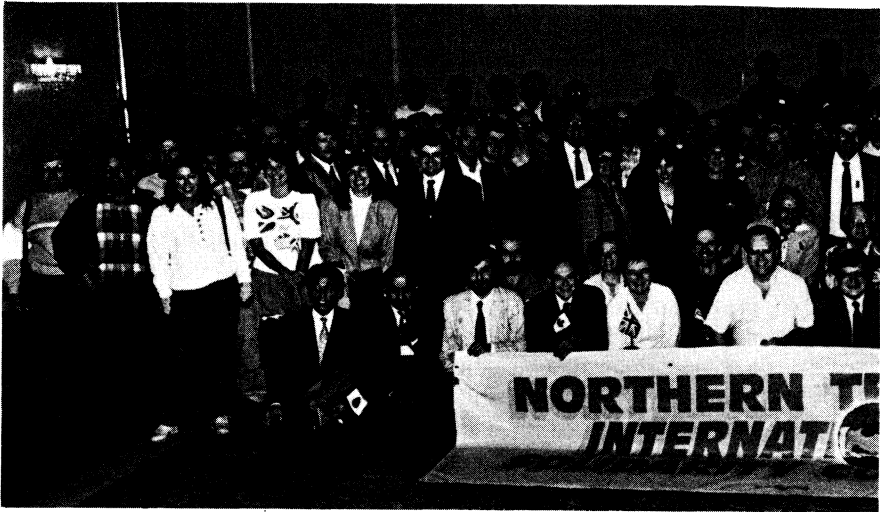
international petition drive. To date, these petitions have been signed by more than 5,000 Northern employees and supporters in at least 30 countries. On July 19, 1993, four years after the technicians' strike began, petitions were presented to Northern's vice president for global labor relations, at company headquarters in Toronto, by a delegation from CAW, CEP and CWA. The company exchanged information on its business plans and discussed its labor relations practices. Over the last few years, the anti-union labor relations management at Northern has been replaced by a vice president and North American director who both support collective bargaining. However, corporate policy does not yet accept management neutrality as a principle when Northern workers are organizing.

For CWA, the continued involvement of CWA's Northern Telecom members in the international work is central. Such involvement must be linked to continuing mobilization, including education on other key issues. John Viverito is a technician from New Jersey, a leader of the 1989 strike and participant at the Toronto conference. Viverito commented, "For those of us who are active in the union, we realize that working for an international firm requires contact, information exchange and solidarity between our unions in different countries. We need that support and need to be able to provide it for others, as well."

MOBILIZING INTERNATIONALLY

CWA's Northern Telecom experience has encouraged our union to begin other international coalition efforts. We have signed bilateral alliances with the CEP and a Mexican telecommunications union, STRM. We have a similar alliance with a British telecom union, STE, to help support several hundred of their members working for British Telecom in the U.S. Most importantly, CWA President Bahr has helped convince the international trade secretariat Postal, Telephone, and Telegraph International (PTTI) to focus joint work on five multinational corporations, including Northern Telecom. Unions with members at these firms agree to share information, support organizational efforts, and provide global pressure in the event of a labor dispute.

Unions have worked together to oppose U.S.-based SPRINT from expanding operations in the United Kingdom, given SPRINT's brutal campaign against unionization of its long distance operation in this country. Similarly, international opposition has focused on Cable and Wireless (C&W), which operates the telecom monopoly in Hong Kong, and Mercury Communications, a nonunion service provider



in the United Kingdom. The National Communications Union is organizing at Mercury, while in Hong Kong, the union is engaged in an ongoing battle for survival. Another target company is Telefonica de Espana, which in addition to monopolizing the Spanish market, owns a controlling share of the telecom companies in Argentina and Chile. Last year, Telefonica agreed to meet and confer with representatives of its unions globally. Finally, British Telecom's (dominant British teleco which is fully unionized) alliance with anti-union MCI will pose further challenges to this international strategy.

The real test of this strategy, however, lies in our ability to move beyond conferring and sharing information. Many telecom unions, including our own, must focus much more clearly on organizational development, including efforts to organize the unorganized in our own countries.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE ILO

Organized labor needs to present multinational employers with an international set of principles and standards that labor organizations and their allies agree to enforce with or without governmental assistance. While some principles have been established by the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), these rest solely on governmental support and are not enforced.



International solidarity reaches new heights as 11 unions representing Northern Telecom workers in eight countries form a global employee network.

Our principles are simple:

- 1) There shall be no management interference in worker organizational efforts in any country where the firm or any subsidiary conducts business.
- 2) When presented with the appropriate level of organizational support relevant to a particular nation's recognition standards, the firm shall recognize the union and its representatives.
- 3) Production shall not be shifted from nation to nation to seek low wages or avoid union recognition.

The particular standards applied to each of these principles may vary depending on national law and custom. More importantly, if we begin to present such principles uniformly and internationally to our multinational employers, change becomes possible. International labor solidarity can be effective in pressuring firms to comply.

Northern Telecom is important because in at least several instances, Northern employees in different countries have acted based on not only their own situations, but those of workers in other nations. This has led to positive changes from the company.

It is difficult, however, for members and their organizations to work from such a framework. We need to constantly remind ourselves that broadening our support through membership involvement, organizing, and international labor cooperation is likely to be our best hope for maintaining our living standards and the unions that defend them. ■