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A sudden and unprecedented Friday-morning lockout of nearly 1,100 IBEW Local 435 telecommunications technicians and allied trade workers in the Province of Manitoba—that was the response of Winnipeg-based MTS Communications Inc. last spring following a contract negotiations dispute with its employees.



Local 435 Business Manager Dave Nyhof addresses the April 14 rally at MTS headquarters in Winnipeg. Standing behind him is Assistant Business Manager John Jacobs.



New Democratic Party leader Gary Doer addresses the crowd gathered for the rally as area news media cover the event.

At right, IBEW Local 435, Winnipeg, Manitoba, members and their supporters gather for a huge rally at company headquarters to protest the lockout of telecommunications technicians and allied trade workers at MTS Communications Inc.

At the protest rally, marchers file past MTS headquarters and display their signs for passing motorists to see, generating public support for the locked-out Local 435 craft and shop workers.

y Lockout Manitoba Telecom to Rally

Despite the initial shock of that April 9 lockout, Local 435 wasted no time gearing up to launch a rapid and highly effective response to the challenge. Eleven days after the lockout—following daily picketing at work sites and a big labor-wide rally at company headquarters in Winnipeg—the IBEW workers had successfully rallied to score a major victory and were back on their jobs with a new contract.

MTS Communications was formed as a result of the privatization in 1997 of the former Manitoba Telephone System, which was owned and operated by the Province of Manitoba. Local 435 Assistant Business Manager John Jacobs reported

“the company demanded major changes to: standby and home dispatch programs, craftline duties (requiring “cross crafting” or working outside one’s job description), terms and conditions for out-of-province work, job classifications, and seniority clauses.”

The business manager said, “When the company insisted that a rejected contract be mailed out again for a re-vote (“until you get it right”), the union took the only reasonable stand—no re-vote without changes. No means no.” MTS responded with the lockout of the IBEW skilled workers.

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organizations and high-ranking provincial politicians. Most significantly, more than 600 Local 435 members (with 100 percent attendance from the Winnipeg area alone) marched and cheered along with their fellow unionists and supporters.

Labor representatives in attendance at the rally included those with: the Steelworkers union; the Manitoba Federation of Labor; the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE); the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW); the Manitoba Government Employees Union (MGEU); and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP). CEP Locals 7 and 55 represent 1,500 operators and clerical workers at MTS. Shortly after the IBEW lockout, CEP was locked out for 14 weeks.

“The rally was an unqualified success—lifting spirits, confirming solidarity and garnering tremendous public support,” said Business Manager Nyhof. He noted that, “After six days of picketing, the employer relented and agreed to meet with the IBEW negotiating team. To the surprise of no one, changes were agreed to on several key issues, and a tentative agreement was hammered out by day nine. Ratification was completed in record time as members from our vast prairie province cast ballots in person. After eleven days on the line, on April 20, we returned to our jobs.”

He said, “This lockout confirmed everything we had suspected about the new face of employer/employee relations in the 1990s. The privatization of ‘old guard’ telephone companies is accompanied by such antagonistic management practices as lockouts, scabs and ultimatums. What did we learn from this lockout? We learned about preparedness, communications, adaptability and direct action. We learned how to picket and how to rally. We learned who our friends are, outside of our own ranks. We learned that after many, many years as employees of a government-owned monopoly, we can muster the solidarity, determination and creativity needed to fight for our rights in the world of private, competitive industry. Best of all, our employer learned that we are a ‘real’ union. We did this together, and we can do it again.”



that “In its 95-year history, Local 435’s telecommunications workers had endured only two work disruptions—a job-saving hours reduction in the 1930s and a sympathy strike in the early 1970s.” He said, “Being employees of the only telephone company in the province, and government employees at that, had its advantages. But by the spring of 1999, ‘our’ telco had been thrust into a competitive environment, privatized, downsized and aligned with Bell Canada. Small wonder that employees were worried when negotiations went sour in April.”

Local 435 Business Manager Dave Nyhof noted that in contract negotiations

the fly as scab managers attempted to do our jobs,” said Assistant Business Manager Jacobs. “The presence of so many scabs at so many work sites, combined with private security forces, police officers and the public, created tense lines and sometimes angry confrontations. But by the end of the first few days, our members had learned the key lessons [regarding picketing practices].”

Midway through the lockout, on April 14, Local 435 quickly organized a huge rally at company headquarters in Winnipeg. The rally generated widespread media coverage and drew sympathy picketers, representatives from other labor