

Statement of Sharon Harrison to the Senate Committee on Health, Employment, Labor and Pensions

March 10, 2009

Good morning. My name is Sharon Harrison. I'm a customer service representative for AT&T Mobility and work at a call center in Lebanon, Virginia. I want to thank the members of this Committee for giving me this opportunity to talk with you about the real benefits that union representation has brought to my co-workers, my company and my community.

My co-workers and I are members of the Communications Workers of America and that has made a big difference in bringing and keeping quality jobs with quality benefits to our area.

I'm also glad to have the opportunity to talk about majority sign-up, or "card check," and how it really works. Being able to have a union voice at AT&T Mobility – and knowing that our company respects us and considers us a real partner in the business makes all the difference in our workplace.

I've worked at the company that is now AT&T Mobility since August 2003. We didn't always have a union and we didn't always have management that respected workers' rights or wanted to work with us.

In those days, before we had our union, favoritism was a problem. Raises didn't depend on your job performance but whether your manager liked you. The same was true for job security, and even when someone was a top performer, she or he could be told, like I was, that "I can get rid of you for any reason."

That all changed in 2005 when Cingular Wireless took over. Cingular had agreed with the Communications Workers to remain neutral in an organizing campaign, to let workers across the company make up our own minds and to recognize the union if a majority signed up and indicated that we wanted a union.

Because of that agreement, we weren't afraid anymore that managers would retaliate against us for trying to organize a union. We were able to talk to our coworkers before the call center opened, during breaks, lunches and after shifts about the benefits of a union.

In fact the head of Cingular Wireless at the time, Stan Sigman, came to our call center when we were signing up for union representation and made it clear that under his management, there would be full respect for workers' rights.

That set the tone.

More than a majority of workers signed up for CWA representation at the Lebanon call center and I can honestly say that all of us, the company and our community included, are better for it.

For us workers, the benefits are real: better pay, better benefits, lower health care costs, a real grievance procedure and fairness. We have new opportunities for careers throughout the company and we know we're providing the quality service that makes our company a leader in the wireless telecommunications industry.

We know that AT&T Mobility respects us and respects our contributions to the company. We're in a real partnership now, one that started at the very top of the company and that worked its way through every level.

For AT&T Mobility, there are real benefits as well, and I think that management would be the first to tell you so. With union representation, there's now a framework to solve problems on the job. We didn't have that before. There's a way to address critical issues like turnover, training, and new technology. There's a clear path to improving our jobs and our work, and that's important to AT&T Mobility and important to us.

Having an employer like AT&T Mobility in my part of Virginia also is very important. We're way in the tip of southwestern Virginia, and even in good times, good jobs are hard to come by. We need more quality employers like AT&T Mobility that provide good jobs and good benefits, the kind of jobs that enable you to support your family and be a contributing part of the community.

In an industry where companies compete based on customer service, AT&T Mobility recognizes that a quality workforce gives it a real competitive edge. And we're going to do everything we can to keep it that way.

We're proud of AT&T Mobility and the work we do. We're proud that we provide top quality customer service and that AT&T Mobility is adding millions more customers every year. We want AT&T Mobility to continue to be successful and we will do our best to make that happen.

And we're very proud that we work for a company that respects us, that listens to us and that considers us a real partner in the business.

Now this doesn't mean that we always agree with AT&T Mobility management. In fact, we just finished bargaining a new contract with AT&T Mobility that covers about 20,000 workers, including my call center in Lebanon. As a member of the bargaining committee, I can tell you first hand that we had a lot of differences with management. But because this company respects workers' rights and respected our right to collective bargaining, we were able to work out a new contract that workers will be voting on soon.

The Employee Free Choice Act is important because all workers deserve to have the same chance I did to join a union, if that's what they want to do. I know firsthand what a big difference it makes when you don't have to be afraid anymore to stand up for your rights at work.

And I know first hand how bargaining rights can restore the quality jobs and quality benefits that working families and our communities need today, more than ever in these bad economic times.

Thank you again for the opportunity to talk with you today.