



# CWA HISTORY

## *A Brief Review*

1910-2024

Front and back cover pictures:

August 2023. Over 300 CWA activists gather in Washington, D.C., to commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

# ABOUT CWA

CWA was founded in 1938 at meetings in Chicago and New Orleans. First known as the National Federation of Telephone Workers, the union became the Communications Workers of America in 1947.

CWA got its start in the telephone industry, but today it represents workers in the United States, Puerto Rico, and Canada in the communications and information industries, as well as the news media, the airline industry, broadcast and cable television, public service, higher education, health care, manufacturing, high tech fields, and more.

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Circa 1917. Lineworkers.

# BEFORE WE WERE CWA 1910-1947

Unionization of the telephone industry was limited to a few scattered pockets of organized workers during the first three decades of the 20th century. The undertaking of unionizing telephone workers was made more difficult after 1919, when AT&T promoted 'company unions' (commonly known as associations or committees) in order to prevent the growth of genuine unionism. Before AT&T's efforts to counteract the potential union growth, the telephone department of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) – which was the first union that attempted organizing in the telephone industry – was 20,000 members strong. However, through years of AT&T carrying out its strategy to build company associations over actual unions, virtually all IBEW telephone locals were destroyed.

The circumstances of working people changed for the better in 1935, when the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA, also known as the Wagner Act) passed. The NLRA:

- Prohibited the employer from engaging in certain activities that were defined as unfair labor practices (this included setting up and promoting company unions).
- Protected unions and collective activity. In addition to organizing, it protected workers who take part in grievances, on-the-job protests, picketing, and strikes.
- Established an agency, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), to enforce the above provisions.

The passage of the Wagner Act was a pivotal moment for the American labor movement.

Strengthened by the new rights gained under the act, new independent unions began to spring up across the country. The leaders of these unions recognized the advantages of joining together in an organization where they could exchange ideas and coordinate national activities. In November 1938, representatives of 31 telephone organizations, representing 145,000 members combined, assembled in New Orleans, establishing the National Federation of Telephone Workers (NFTW). NFTW was not a national union but a federation of local independent unions. Ultimately, NFTW's lack of authority over its affiliated unions created challenges when dealing with a giant company like AT&T.

NFTW was also confronted with a lack of representation on national and regional War Labor Boards during World War II. Labor representatives on these boards came from the AFL and CIO (separate organizations at the time). However, NFTW was not affiliated with either group, and was proven right in its worry that the interests of telephone workers would not be effectively protected by the boards.



April 1947. NFTW on strike.

When the war ended in August 1945, the wages of telephone workers remained below those of many industries. Contract negotiations stalled, and the presidents of the NFTW affiliates authorized the Union's Executive Board to call a nationwide strike at 6:00 a.m. on March 7, 1946. In the early morning hours of March 7, workers around the country prepared to walk the picket lines.

At 5:30 a.m., after 20 hours of bargaining, NFTW President Joseph Beirne and Cleo Craig, AT&T Vice President in charge of negotiations, signed the Beirne-Craig memorandum. A strike had been avoided, and for the first time in history, AT&T had negotiated a national agreement with the Union and committed its associated companies to that agreement.



June 1947. CWA formed.

While a major victory was won in the 1946 negotiations, the basic weakness of the NFTW had revealed itself. During negotiations, 34 of the 51 affiliated unions broke away and signed separate agreements.

This weakness in the NFTW structure was exposed with devastating consequences the following year. In 1946, AT&T was not prepared for a strike. However, in 1947, AT&T was not only prepared for a strike, but it also forced NFTW into strike action. AT&T was determined not to repeat the Beirne-Craig type of national settlement. It flatly refused to bargain on an industry-wide basis. AT&T approached bargaining with a divide-and-conquer strategy. The company did not make a wage offer until three weeks into the strike and made the offer contingent upon the affiliates agreeing not to clear it with NFTW's policy committee. Five weeks after the strike began, seventeen contracts had been signed. The strike collapsed, and the NFTW was finished.

During the 1947 strike, the AFL and CIO lent their moral and financial support, despite the fact that NFTW was not affiliated with either organization at the time. International unions in both the AFL and the CIO aided the strikers with contributions totaling \$128,000 (over \$1.7 million in 2024 dollars). This support was very important in helping NFTW workers survive the strike and regroup into a strong and truly national union.

# A NEW UNION

## Late 1940s to 1960s

### 1947-49: Formation



Circa 1944. Joseph Beirne.

In June 1947, a truly national union, the Communications Workers of America, came into being. The first CWA Convention took place that month in Miami, with 200 delegates representing 162,000 workers. The delegates adopted the first CWA Constitution. Joseph Beirne was elected President and Carlton Werkau, Secretary-Treasurer. In February 1949, after debating affiliation with either the AFL or CIO, CWA's Executive Board recommended affiliation with the CIO, and, in a referendum, the membership approved it.

### 1951: National Defense Fund

In 1951, after two days of heated debate on the issue, the delegates to the annual Convention voted to establish a National Defense Fund with contributions of 50 cents per member per month.

### 1955: Southern Bell Strike

In 1955, CWA undertook its most difficult task since its formation eight years earlier: a regional strike against Southern Bell that lasted 72 days, encompassing nine states and 50,000 workers. Members signed a contract with across-the-board gains.



December 1954.  
CWA members on strike against  
Alabama Telephone Company.

## 1963: General Telephone of California Strike

In October 1963, CWA members went on strike against General Telephone of California for wages and benefits comparable to those enjoyed by Bell employees in the state.

## 1965: Triple Threat Program

In 1965, Convention delegates, at President Beirne's urging, adopted CWA Growth Resolution #1, which endorsed the Triple Threat program and clearly stated that organizing was a top priority of the union. It was Beirne's program for broadening the membership base and expanding CWA's influence in the areas of politics and legislation as well as collective bargaining. Beirne believed—and it has remained CWA's philosophy—that all these activities are mutually dependent and equally vital to CWA's overall success in representing its members.

## 1968: First National Strike since 1947

1969 brought the first national strike against the Bell System since 1947. Some 200,000 CWA telephone workers walked out because AT&T refused to agree to wage increases that would meet the rise in the cost of living. The strike lasted 18 days, with AT&T ultimately agreeing to a raise in wages and benefits that totaled nearly 20 percent over a three-year period.

# 1970s

## 1970-71: AT&T Charged with Discrimination; CWA's Biggest Settlement

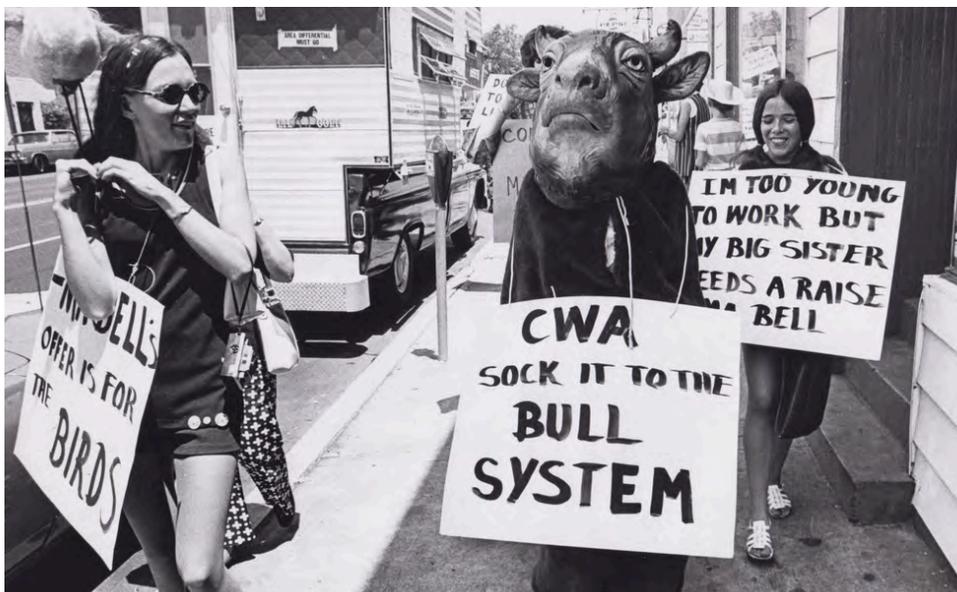
On December 10, 1970, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) filed charges against AT&T and its twenty-four operating companies for discriminating on the basis of sex, race, and national origin in their employment practices. The settlement, called the "consent decree," provided for compensation for the victims of past discrimination and an affirmative action program for changing the pattern of discrimination in the Bell System.

400,000 CWA members nationwide went on strike against the Bell System in 1971 for wage increases to offset the devastating inflation of the previous three years. After a one-week strike, CWA achieved the biggest economic package ever negotiated with the Bell System and obtained, for the first time, a cost of living adjustment clause (COLA) and big city allowance.

## 1971: First Special Convention

At CWA's first "special convention," delegates adopted a constitutional amendment that required all Locals to carry out the union's policies, participate actively in political and legislative activities, participate in local officer and steward training programs, and attend all District, state, and area meetings.

Also adopted at the Convention was a constitutional amendment providing three-year terms (prior to 1971, there were 2-year terms) of office at both the international and local levels.



August 1971. CWA members picketing against the Bell System.

## 1973: General Telephone Tri-State Strike

In 1973, 6,000 CWA members in Indiana, Ohio, and Kentucky went on strike against the General Telephone companies of those states. The strike lasted two months in Indiana and Ohio before settlement was reached, but the workers in Kentucky were on the picket line for five months before their contract demands were met.

## 1973-74: Equity & Discrimination within CWA

During the 1973 CWA convention, extensive discussions were held on the methods by which CWA dealt with the problems of women and minority members. As a result of these discussions, the National Executive Board established a Blacks and Other Minorities Structure Study Committee and a Female Structure Committee.

Extended discussions at the Executive Board meetings in January and February of 1974 led to a resolution recommending that the President develop a "Committee on Equity" and "Concerned Women's Advancement Committee" concept from the national to the local level of the union. The Executive Board authorized the appointment of these national committees, which still exist today as the "National Civil Rights & Equity Committee" and the "National Women's Committee."

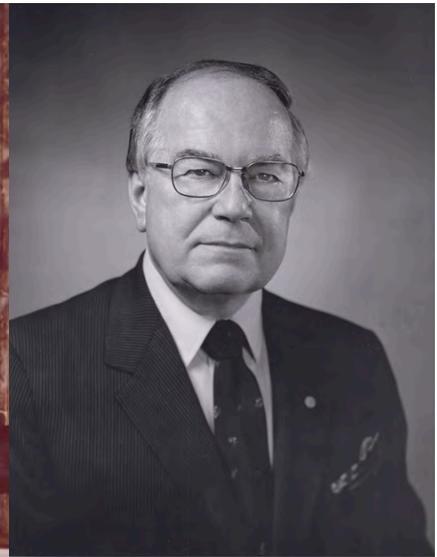
## 1974: First National Bargaining with the Bell System, Passing of President Beirne, and Election of President Watts

1974 was an historic year for CWA. For the first time, the Bell System agreed to conduct unified national bargaining. The Company had finally given up the charade that claimed its operating companies were independent, self-controlled businesses. The new bargaining was structured so that wages, benefits, and contract language would be negotiated at one national table. The 1974 bargaining session was significant because, unlike its 1968 and 1971 predecessors, it did not result in a CWA strike.

President Joseph Beirne passed away on Labor Day 1974. He was succeeded by Secretary-Treasurer Glenn E. Watts.



Glenn Watts (standing) and Morty Bahr (seated).



1985. Glenn Watts.

## 1975-76: Strikes Hit Independents

Three of the most bitter CWA strikes of the 1970s took place at independent telephone locations: a six-month strike at Rochester Telephone Corporation (New York) over an attack on wage levels, at General of Kentucky in 1976 over medical benefits and work rules, and a three-month walkout at New Jersey Telephone over the issue of supervisors performing bargaining unit work.

## 1978: First National Women's Conference

CWA held its first annual National Women's Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Conference participants attended plenary sessions, workshops, and discussion groups. Resolutions on the Equal Rights Amendment, child care, and job pressures were presented to the CWA Executive Board.

## 1979: National Organizing Department Established

On July 12, 1979, the Executive Board authorized President Watts to establish CWA's National Organizing Department.

# 1980s

## 1980-81: CWA Organizes Public Workers

Over the course of the decade, CWA began to expand into fields outside of telecommunications. In July 1980, the CWA Public Workers Department was created. One of the biggest successes in the public sector was the organizing of 34,000 New Jersey state workers in 1981.

## 1981-83: The Committee on the Future and the Special Convention

The Committee on the Future was created in July 1981 by action of the CWA Convention. After a year and a half of study and debate, the Committee submitted its final report and recommendations to the delegates to the special convention in Philadelphia in March 1983.

## 1982: First National Conference on Minority Concerns

The first National Minorities Conference was held in 1982.

## 1983: Striking the Bell System, First Minority Leadership Institute (MLI)

In 1983, only months before the Bell system was to be broken into separate companies, CWA opened national contract negotiations. Not surprisingly, it was a difficult round of negotiations. AT&T was demanding givebacks from workers and seeking substandard job titles. 700,000 CWA members went on strike on August 7 for better wages, employment security, pension plan changes, and health insurance improvements. The strike lasted 22 days when the telephone industry agreed to meet the union's demands. This would be the last time that CWA would be able to negotiate at one national table for all its Bell System members because divestiture was only a few months away.



1983.  
22 day  
Bell  
Strike  
(left).  
The first  
MLI class  
(right).

In response to recommendations by the National Committee on Equity for training opportunities devoted to minorities, the Executive Board established the Minorities Leadership Institute, a three-week intensive study program. Today, the Minority Leadership Institute, or MLI, is a week-long program held annually with participants recommended by District Vice Presidents.

## 1984: Divestiture and Beyond

For CWA, the most significant event of this decade was the divestiture of AT&T on January 1, 1984. The break-up of the Bell System was of great concern to the union. CWA feared that divestiture would bring relocations, personal hardship, and repudiation by the new independent Regional Bell Operating Companies (RBOCs) and their subsidiaries of contract gains previously won by the union. Personal hardship and relocation did, in fact, occur, forcing CWA to work hard to preserve the gains that four decades of sacrifice and solidarity had achieved. Job security issues catapulted to the top of the list of bargaining priorities for 1986. During this difficult period, President Watts often reminded the members that it was AT&T that had broken up, not CWA—the union remained as unified, committed, and strong as ever.

Also in this year, the members of the Federation of Telephone Workers of Pennsylvania voted overwhelmingly to merge with CWA. The Executive Board created District 13 to accommodate the 12,250 newly affiliated men and women.

## 1985: Election of President Bahr & S-T Booe

In 1985, President Glenn E. Watts and Secretary-Treasurer Louis Knecht retired after serving eleven years in these offices. Elected to replace them were Morton Bahr and James B. Booe, respectively.



Morty Bahr speaking to AT&T strikers.



James Booe.

## 1986: Post-Divestiture Bargaining

1986 presented CWA with its first negotiations with the post-divestiture telephone industry. Twelve years after CWA had achieved national bargaining, the union was forced back to the old multiple-table way of bargaining. CWA had to bargain not only with AT&T but also with the independent RBOCs and their subsidiaries. National bargaining had been replaced by 48 different bargaining tables.

In the AT&T negotiations, the company attempted to take back health care benefits, lower clerical wages, and eliminate cost of living adjustments obtained in earlier contracts. CWA had no choice but to strike. The strike lasted 26 days, and AT&T agreed to provide wage and employment security improvements and retain the health care benefits intact. Although the negotiations with the RBOCs were also difficult, they were less contentious than those with AT&T.

## 1987: ITU Merges with CWA

In 1987, members of the International Typographical Union (ITU) were welcomed into CWA.

## 1989: NYNEX Strike

NYNEX workers spent 17 weeks on the picket line, fighting management's attempts to shift health care costs. "Their victory in holding the line against concessions is a victory for tens of thousands of other telephone workers. Because of their sacrifice, others won't have to endure strikes in our next round of negotiations because we've sent a message throughout the industry—we're solidly united," President Bahr declared following the Dec. 4 settlement.

But the strike was not without a price. Local 1103 member Gerry Horgan lost his life on the picket line when he was struck and killed by a scab driving a car at a NYNEX facility. Since his death in 1989 to the present day, CWA members wear red every Thursday in honor of Gerry.

# 1990s

## 1992: Election of First Woman S-T Easterling, HQ Move

Barbara J. Easterling was elected as the union's first woman Secretary-Treasurer.

After more than 30 years headquartered at the Mercury Building in Washington, D.C., the union moved to a new building across town, which is two blocks from the Department of Labor and four blocks from the Capitol.



June 1989.  
Barbara Easterling at a  
Congressional hearing.

## 1993-97: Campus Organizing, NABET and TNG Affiliation

CWA membership continues to grow outside the traditional telephone units, with substantial gains at colleges and universities. Graduate students working as teaching and graduate assistants at the State University of New York (SUNY) saw the end of a 13-year organizing struggle when they were finally allowed to vote for union representation. The Union of Professional and Technical Employees (UPTe) from the University of California system affiliates with CWA in 1993.

The National Association of Broadcast Engineers and Technicians (NABET) affiliates with CWA in 1993 and fully merges in 1994. NABET represents engineers, technicians, and other broadcast workers at NBC and ABC, TV networks and independent TV stations, and cable TV production companies.

In 1995, members of The Newspaper Guild (TNG, now The NewsGuild), representing news industry workers in the U.S. and Canada, vote overwhelmingly to affiliate and eventually merge (in 1997) with CWA.



Circa 1996. Detroit newspaper workers struck for almost three years, from July 1995 to February 1997.

## 1997: Historic Union Neutrality Agreement with SBC & PacTel, US Airways Affiliation

A five-year campaign that integrated continuous bargaining, membership education, political action, mobilization, and strategic organizing culminates in March 1997 with CWA and SBC (Southwestern Bell Corporation) signing the most far-reaching union neutrality agreement in the union's history. A similar agreement was reached with PacTel in April.

CWA won the biggest private sector organizing victory in a decade when 10,000 passenger service professionals at US Airways voted to join CWA.



August 1998. CWA members picketing against Bell Atlantic in Ewing, New Jersey.

## 1998: Alliance with PRTC Workers, SNET Workers Join CWA

In the aftermath of the 41-day strike and a 2-day general strike against the privatization of the Puerto Rico Telephone Company, CWA entered into an alliance with the Independent Union of Telephone Workers of Puerto Rico. The agreement calls for joint bargaining and organizing strategies in response to the acquisition of the PRTC by GTE.

In a representation election that culminated a 14-year effort, 7,500 workers of the Southern New England Telephone Company joined CWA.



Circa 1990s. CWA members rallying in support of the Congress of South African Trade Unionists (COSATU). A resolution to support COSATU was adopted at the 52nd Convention in 1990.



May 1987 (left) and May 1990 (right), CWA, UAW, and the AFL-CIO picketing together to stand against apartheid and boycott Shell.

# 2000s

## 2000: IUE Merges with CWA, Verizon Strike

On October 1, 113,000 members of IUE voted to merge with CWA at their 27th National Constitutional Convention held in Cleveland, Ohio. Earlier, at CWA's 62nd Annual Convention, held on August 29, delegates voted to welcome them.

On August 6, 87,000 CWA telephone workers went on strike against Verizon Communications. Later in August, a settlement was reached.

## 2003: AFA and UCW Join CWA

The Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) merged with CWA, adding its professionalism and expertise on airline industry issues.

With its origins in a living wage campaign at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, United Campus Workers expands to other University of Tennessee campuses, and, in 2003, the workers join CWA. UCW-CWA becomes a powerful movement to build power across job classifications on college and university campuses across the country.

## 2005: Election of President Cohen & EVP Rechenbach

Larry Cohen is elected CWA's President and Jeff Rechenbach is elected Executive Vice President.



April 2013.  
Larry Cohen at  
the 74th  
Convention.



July 2011.  
Jeff  
Rechenbach  
at the 73rd  
Convention.

## 2006: Ready for the Future Strategic Plan

Convention delegates adopted “Ready for the Future: CWA Strategic Plan,” and a bold new Strategic Industry Fund (SIF) was established as part of the plan. The fund allows for the financing of major, large-scale campaigns to increase our bargaining power and carry out proactive campaigns. The strategic plan also mandated that the Executive Board bring to the 2007 convention specific proposals to increase Board diversity.

## 2007: Diversity Executive Board

Convention delegates adopted a resolution and corresponding constitutional changes, adding four at-large diversity Executive Board members to be elected at the 2008 convention.

## 2008: Re-Election of President Cohen, Election of S-T Rechenbach & EVP Hill

Convention delegates re-elected President Larry Cohen and elected Jeff Rechenbach Secretary-Treasurer and Annie Hill Executive Vice President. Four at-large diversity Executive Board members were also elected.



January 2012. Annie Hill, then CWA Secretary-Treasurer, speaking at the 2012 Legislative-Political Conference.

## 2009: FMLA for Flight Attendants

Congress extends FMLA protections to Flight Attendants, a big victory for AFA-CWA.

# 2010s

## 2010: One Nation Together March and Move to Biennial Convention

Over 10,000 CWAers join civil rights, Latino, faith, green, and community allies at the One Nation Together March at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., standing up for jobs, economic and social justice, and a government that works for all.

Delegates to CWA's 72nd Convention approve a constitutional amendment for biennial conventions, which took effect in 2011.

## 2011: Verizon Strike, Re-Election of President Cohen, Election of S-T Hill; Democracy Initiative

45,000 CWA Verizon workers from Virginia to New England went on strike for 16 days. A settlement was reached in 2012. Larry Cohen was re-elected President, and Annie Hill was elected Secretary-Treasurer. The Executive Vice President position was eliminated. CWA, Sierra Club, NAACP, and Greenpeace launch the Democracy Initiative (DI) to restore the core principles of political equality: money in politics, voter rights, and senate rule reform.

## 2012: 99% Spring Training

The 2007-08 financial crisis and Great Recession devastated working families, while the wealthy investors and Wall Street speculators who caused the crisis faced few consequences and recovered quickly. In response, CWA and nearly 100 organizations join together for "99% Spring Training" to train 100,000 activists on the roots of economic inequality and how tools like union organizing can be used to take back the economy from the 1% and challenge corporate greed.

## 2013: Growth Funds, Members' Relief Fund

Delegates to the 2013 Convention approve the establishment of Growth Funds to support building a movement for economic justice and democracy and enhance the union's organizing, leadership development, research, and industry analysis. Delegates also adopted the merging of the Defense Fund into the Members' Relief Fund.

## 2014: American Airlines Passenger Service Agents Join CWA

After a 19-year struggle, 9,000 new American Airlines passenger service agents voted to join CWA members at US Airways to form a new bargaining unit of 14,500 agents. By an 86 percent vote, airport and reservations agents overwhelmingly chose union representation, making it one of the largest labor organizing victories in the South in decades.

## 2015: Election of President Shelton & S-T Steffens

The 75th Convention elected Chris Shelton as President and Sara Steffens as Secretary-Treasurer. Convention delegates also adopt red as the official color of CWA.



June 2015.  
Chris Shelton  
addressing the  
75th  
Convention.



July 2019. Sara  
Steffens  
addressing the  
77th  
Convention.

## 2016: Campaigning against the TPP

From 2012 to 2016, CWA campaigned against the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a major free trade agreement that hurts CWA members, other American workers, and workers across the globe. LPATs executed an elaborate political education campaign nationally to bring members across the country together to stand against the devastating agreement. CWA partnered with other progressive organizations, like the Sierra Club, in these efforts.

## 2017: CWA STRONG

Delegates to the 2017 CWA Convention adopt the CWA STRONG plan to move every member to action, with the goal of strengthening the union at all levels and expanding CWA's capacity to survive and fight back against increased attacks on workers' rights.

# 2020s

## 2020: Working During a Pandemic

CWA negotiates historic “Work From Home” (WFH) accommodations during the COVID-19 pandemic to keep workers safe. Historic contracts were made in the broadcasting, nonprofit, media, public service, and telecommunications industries. COVID-specific agreements were also made in the airline and healthcare industries.

## 2023: Historic Election of President Cummings & S-T Salaam



July 2023. Claude Cummings Jr. and Ameenah Salaam at the 79th Convention.

In July 2023, delegates to the 79th Convention historically elect Claude Cummings Jr. and Ameenah Salaam, respectively, as CWA’s first Black male International President and first Black female International Secretary-Treasurer.

Prior to his election as President, Cummings served as an at-large member of the CWA's Executive Board, then as Vice President of CWA District 6, representing workers in Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas. He also led the Human Rights Department for the union. Cummings began work at Southwestern Bell Telephone Company (now AT&T) in 1973, and worked as a Frame Attendant and Communications Technician, maintaining systems for NASA, among other corporate customers. Prior to his election as District 6 Vice President, he was President of CWA Local 6222, representing more than 8,000 members, having previously served in other leadership positions in the local. Cummings was the first Black man elected to all of these positions.

Salaam has risen through the ranks from her early days as a local leader: Staff Representative in then District 13, as well as District 9; District 9 Area Director; Assistant to the Vice President; Assistant to CWA International President Chris Shelton; and now CWA International Secretary-Treasurer. Salaam started her union career when she went to work for Diamond State Telephone in 1991 as a Customer Service Representative. She was elected as a CWA Local 13100 steward and served as Vice President of the local until she joined the CWA national staff in 1997.

## 2020-21: CWA Establishes the CODE-CWA Initiative and the Alphabet Workers Union-CWA

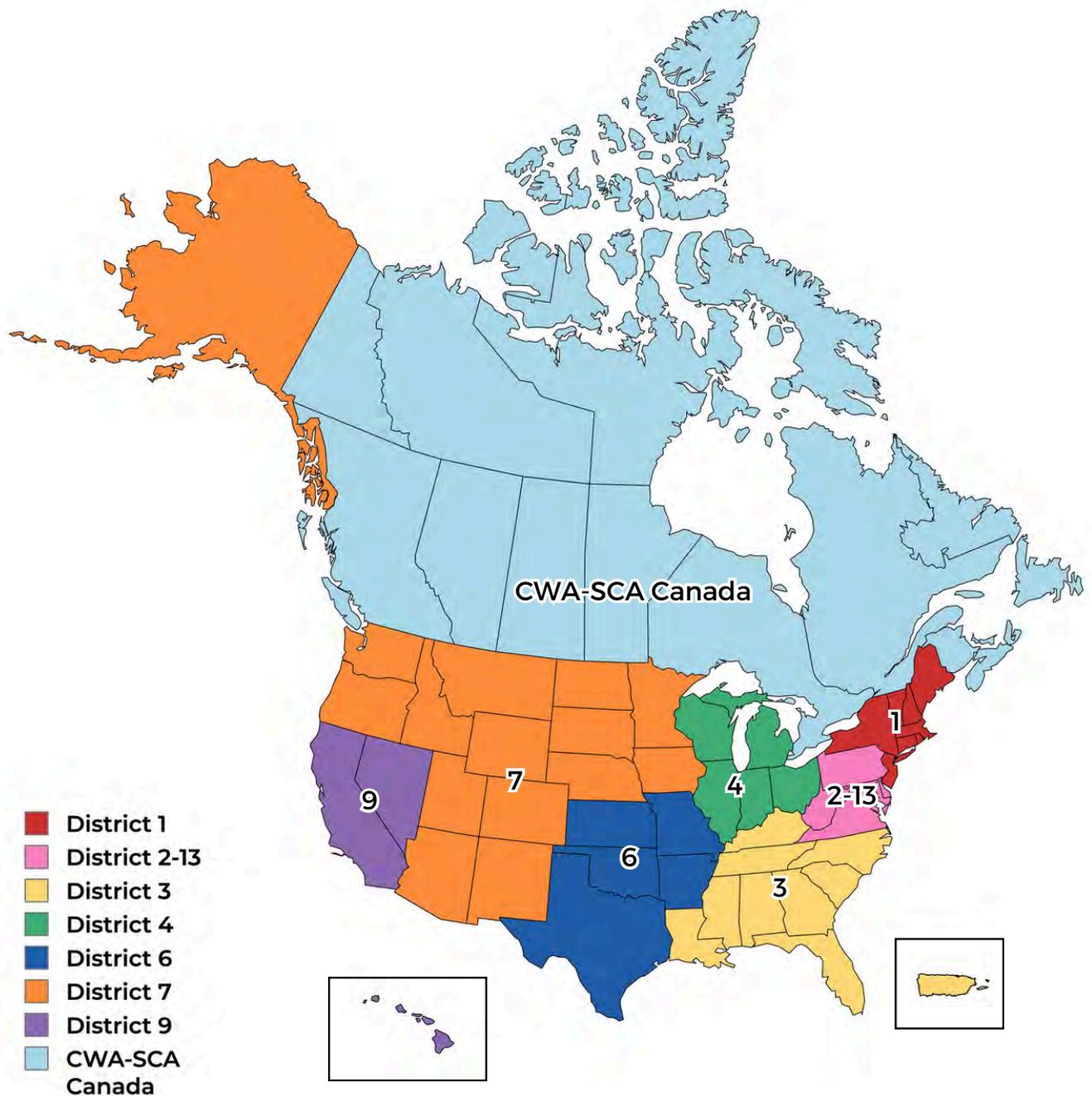
CWA establishes the CODE-CWA initiative in January 2020 to support workers' organizing efforts in the technology and video game industries and address concerns around workers' rights and workplace conditions, including the disconnect between the companies' stated values and the societal impact of the technology.

In January 2021, workers at Google and other Alphabet companies announce the creation of the Alphabet Workers Union-CWA, the first of its kind in the company's history. It is the first union open to all employees and contractors at any Alphabet company, with dues-paying members, an elected board of directors, and paid organizing staff.

## 2024: AI Taskforce

In November 2023, the Committee on Artificial Intelligence (AI) presented the Executive Board with a Report on AI Principles and Recommendations. Bargaining principles included Accountability, Proactive Bargaining, and Early & Meaningful Worker Voice. The report also provided public policy principles. The Committee on AI was approved to continue work that is at the forefront of CWA's priorities in 2024 as our union adapts to the rapid popularization and implementation of AI in society and at work.





### **CWA Sectors and Industries**

- Association of Flight Attendants (AFA-CWA)
- CWA Telecommunications
- CWA Telecommunications and Technologies (T&T, Independent Telephone)
- International Union of Electronic, Electrical, Salaried, Machine and Furniture Workers (IUE-CWA)
- CWA Public, Healthcare, and Education Workers (PHEW)
- The NewsGuild (TNG-CWA)
- The National Association of Broadcast Employees & Technicians (NABET-CWA)

