

BCE offers severance packages to 1,200 unionized employees across Canada

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BCE Inc. is offering severance packages to 1,200 union employees across Canada, the telecom said Monday night.

The company said in a statement that the offers are the result of unprecedented challenges facing Canada's telecommunications industry, as well as organizational initiatives that have led to reduced workloads requiring fewer positions.

BCE has been under pressure in recent quarters to ease the strain on its bottom line. It is currently paying out more in dividends than it earns in free cash flow, and carries a high debt load of more than \$40.5-billion.

The offers will span both administrative and technical roles, according to Unifor, Canada's largest private-sector union. It said the buyouts are being offered to seven units across the country: Bell Craft, Bell Clerical, Atlantic Craft and Clerical, Bell Sales, Local 950 (Bell West), Bell TV Network, Bell MTS Unifor.

However, Bell Media is excluded from this planned voluntary separation program, BCE confirmed.

“Volunteering for an enhanced package will provide eligible unionized employees an option to retire or pursue new career opportunities,” said spokesperson Luc Levasseur in an e-mail.

In a release, Unifor national president Lana Payne criticized the job-reduction program and the company’s chief executive officer Mirko Bibic, referencing the company’s other recent job cuts including a 4,800-person cut last February and its decision to acquire U.S.-based Zply Fiber for \$5-billion.

“Work-force reduction plans are a damaging stunt to temporarily reduce costs, making profits appear higher on the backs of workers. Bell cannot keep cutting jobs every year and expect the ship to turn itself around,” said Ms. Payne.

“Canada is potentially facing a trade war with the U.S., and Bell has chosen to once again leave Canadian workers unemployed in part to satisfy its move into the American market.”

Just last week, Telus Corp. also offered buyouts to 700 employees across Canada, similarly citing a reduction in workload owing to technological enhancements of its network.