

Wireless issue resolved, but key issues remain

87,000 workers begin second week of strike against Verizon

Our correspondent
12 August 2000

Verizon Communication and the two unions representing 87,000 striking workers reported Thursday that one of the key issues in the six-day strike had been resolved. The demand by the Communication Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) to represent employees at Verizon Wireless, the nation's largest wireless provider, was a central issue in the strike that began August 6.

Neither side is releasing details of the agreement on union representation. Company spokesman Eric Rabe said, "I think this is one of the keys to getting a contract. I think we're at a situation where the rest of the issues that need to be resolved could come together pretty quickly."

CWA spokesman Jeff Miller said, "We think that things are moving along better today than they were yesterday, but I don't want to give people the impression that we're hours away from a settlement, because we're not."

Reportedly the agreement reached Thursday would make it easier for the unions to gain representation of workers at Verizon Wireless. In a process known as a card check, the union will gain representation if a majority of workers at a work site sign cards to join the union. The agreement apparently holds good for only some 8,000 of the 32,000 Verizon Wireless workers in the 12 states from Virginia to Maine and Washington DC that are affected by the strike.

Verizon Communications, formed by the merger of Bell Atlantic and GTE in June, is the nation's largest provider of wireless and local telephone service. The new company has 260,000 employees. It provides local service over 66 million landlines in 31 states, and

wireless service to 25 million customers in all 50 states. The strike affects 27 million customers along the east coast where the union is concentrated. Of the 87,000 workers who are on strike, 72,000 are represented by the CWA and 15,000 by the IBEW.

Other major issues such as forced overtime, working conditions and the company's demand to shift work around the country still have to be resolved. The merger threatens to destroy thousands of jobs as the company uses technology to transfer and concentrate work in job and call centers in non-union areas.

To date 24 workers have been arrested on picket lines, and injunctions limiting picketing have been issued in New York, Delaware and Pennsylvania. In Greensburg, near Pittsburgh, a manager was arrested after hitting two picketers with her car, hospitalizing one in a serious condition.

On Friday, 1,400 CWA members in Kentucky went on strike against Verizon in an area that was formerly GTE.

Underscoring the threat to jobs, Verizon announced that it plans to merge its high speed Internet business with NorthPoint Communications Group, a non-union company. Verizon has been moving to split its data services off from its core business of providing local service. Data communication, seen as a special service just ten years ago, now accounts for more than half of the traffic over the network.

Thousands of workers are currently involved in providing Internet and data communications and the NorthPoint merger further threatens the destruction of jobs. Earlier this year, Bell Atlantic spun off its data services into a separate unit in New York and plans to do the same in the rest of the region.

Thousands of workers took part in demonstrations on Thursday and Friday outside of company offices throughout the Bell Atlantic region. By far the largest demonstration took place in New York City, where some 12,000 workers demonstrated outside Verizon's headquarters wearing red shirts and chanting the union's slogan of "No contract, no peace."

In Pittsburgh, 300 workers demonstrated at the United Steelworkers headquarters, across the street from the Bell Atlantic building. "It is all about job security," said Denise Thomas, a repair technician who has six years with the company. "I plan to retire from here, so the jobs have to be around. We can't lose to non-union areas. I get calls transferred to me from all over the country. I don't know how they are getting our repair calls, but the company can route them anywhere they want. If we don't win this they will transfer all the work to where it is the cheapest for them."

"Bell Atlantic is at the top," said Bill Mangan, another repair technician. "We are making all this money for them and they don't want to insure our jobs. GTE is a different company, it is basically non-union and Verizon now wants to transfer our work to where they can get it done for less."

The company blames union vandalism for breakdowns. It claims there have been 455 cases of vandalism, half of them in New York, and is offering a reward for information leading to the arrest of workers. But workers point to poor management and a series of severe thunderstorms that swept through the region during the first few days of the strike and knocked out service.



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