

Union rejects contract offer—Verizon Communications workers speak on issues in strike

A reporter
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Unions representing 87,000 striking telecommunication workers have rejected the latest contract proposal from Verizon Communications. They say the offer does not address key concerns of forced overtime, job security and stress levels in customer call centers.

Verizon presented the offer to the two unions early Sunday morning. Verizon has “back-tracked on issues like job stress and forced overtime,” said Communication Workers of America spokesperson Candice Johnson. “In some cases, Verizon’s proposals are sending negotiations backward, not forward.”

The strike by 87,000 operators, customer service representatives and technicians is now in its ninth day. The strike began at 12:01 a.m. Sunday, August 6 after the two-year contract between the two unions—the CWA representing 72,000 workers and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, which represents 15,000—and the company expired.

Verizon was formed with the merger of Bell Atlantic and GTE in June. Verizon is the nation’s largest provider of local and wireless telephone service. The company has 63 million access lines going into 33 million households in 31 states plus Washington DC and Puerto Rico, and 25 million wireless customers with a presence in all 50 states, DC and Puerto Rico. Verizon has service in 96 of the top 100 US markets.

The company has 260,000 employees and about one third are on strike. The strike is located in the 12 states from Virginia to Maine and Washington DC that made up the territory of the former Bell Atlantic. Two years ago, workers at Bell Atlantic went on strike for two days. In 1989 workers at what was then the NYNEX Corporation went on strike for 17 weeks.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed workers in New York City and Pittsburgh about the key issues felt by

most workers in the strike—job security, forced overtime and job stress.

Olivia, a customer service representative in New York with 30 years service, said, “The police had arrested someone Tuesday at the picket line on 18th Street and Seventh Ave. They let him go with a bench warrant. There are a lot of police. They come here in full riot gear. Our union representative told us that during the negotiations management has reneged on the concessions that they had given to the union. We could be out here for weeks, or even months.

“The new nonunion workers do not have the training and knowledge that we have. The entire new division for Internet service is entirely nonunion. They are trying to get rid of the union. Management and nonunion workers are still working as we are walking the picket line. The company is transferring customer service calls to call centers upstate and out of state.”

A shop steward who has worked for Bell Atlantic for seven years said, “The head of Bell Atlantic made \$23 million last year. We only make \$42,000 a year. It’s not only the money that concerns me. The company wants to destroy our job security, and take away our benefits. Verizon needs to realize our value. We are the ones who make their money.”

A cable-splicing technician with three years on the job said, “We need to expand the union so that we represent the wireless workers. Right now we are trying to get our foot in the door. We are tired of forced overtime and mandatory quotas. When there is an emergency, we can’t leave the job when we would like to. Also, they want to reduce our medical benefits by forcing us to have an HMO instead of Blue Cross-Blue Shield coverage that we have now.”

“Job security is the most important issue,” said

Constance Thornhill, a service representative with three years service in Pittsburgh. “I don't want to have to move. Now that they merged with GTE the company has mega call centers in Denver and other parts of the country. They would like to move our jobs to those areas where they can pay people less money.

“Things are not so bad where I am working now, but when I was in the business office there was a lot of stress on you. You are constantly monitored over everything that you do. Every call is timed, how long it takes you to handle a customer. If you go off line too long they say something about it. If you go to the bathroom for too long they say something about it. Forced overtime is another problem. They come up to you at the end of your day and they say that you have to stay another two hours. They don't care what that means for you. Many of the people here have young children that they have to pick up from a baby-sitter or something.”

“For us, job security is the main issue,” commented Sherri Kennedy, a maintenance administrator with two years at the company. “Not all of GTE is unionized and they could close down our department and go nonunion. This is the rumor we've been hearing, but I haven't heard a whole lot. We are national now that we work at GTE in addition to the old Bell Atlantic. We take repair calls and route them to the correct facilities.

“We take care of both residential and commercial repairs, for the mid-Atlantic region now. This includes Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia and Maryland. We don't cover New York or New England. There are about 100 of us here at Seventh Avenue. We are hearing rumors that they want to send us to a national GTE center in Texas where they are nonunion.

“There are other issues, including the forced overtime and subcontracting as well as the unionizing of the wireless workers. The situation with the wireless workers is not good. Although I don't know exactly how low their wages are, I know they don't have any benefits, and they don't have 401k plans. They also don't have job security.”

Barry Brunner has 24 years with the company and works in Network Operations Transport Maintenance, monitoring unmanned equipment facilities. His job is part of what are called the NOCs, Network Operations Centers. He said, “I hear the main issue is the wireless company. They are nonunion and union workers aren't allowed to bid for jobs there.

“This is important because it seems like the company is trying to phase out other departments, like my department. We watch equipment remotely in the central

offices. We monitor the unmanned equipment offices remotely, so you know they have already eliminated the jobs that were there.

“Before the last contract, there were three NOC centers in Pennsylvania. One was in Philadelphia, one in Harrisburg and one in Pittsburgh. This was similar to the set-up in the other mid-Atlantic states. There are about 25 to 30 workers in our NOC in Pittsburgh, but after the last contract they eliminated the NOC centers in Philly and Harrisburg, although no one got laid off. Now we are getting killed with all the work of the three centers.

“We want to make sure nobody gets laid off. We got that in the last contract, that is why the other NOC workers did not get laid off. We don't want to be like AT&T who just laid off a couple of hundred workers, up the street.

“I heard that GTE likes to operate out of one giant center to take care of the country. All our bosses are now in Falls Church, Virginia, and when they left one said he didn't think the NOC centers would come back to Pennsylvania at all. I hear that with a lot of other departments the company wants to set up giant operations in Texas. All the technical type offices face this prospect. This would mean a major reorganization and job losses. This is why a lot of people want their job security guaranteed in writing in the contract, because the company outright lies to you.

“We were promised training after they closed down the other NOC centers, and we have never gotten any. The working conditions are terrible. It is very stressful because we don't have enough people. We only have avoided forced overtime by everyone volunteering. People aren't treated as people anymore. The company only sees us as numbers and dollar signs, and that is all there is.”



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