US telecom union ends strike at Verizon

Our correspondent
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Three days after the Communication Workers of America (CWA) split the ranks of striking Verizon workers and ordered the majority back to work, the union ended the walkout by the remaining 37,000 workers Wednesday with a package designed to boost the company's productivity and competitive position. The agreement brings to an end the strike, launched August 6, by 87,000 members of the CWA and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) against the US's largest local and wireless phone provider.

The three-year agreement reached Wednesday night is essentially the same as the one reached Sunday between Verizon and the CWA and the IBEW that ended the strike for 50,000 telecommunication workers in New York and New England. It includes a 12 percent wage increase over three years—tied to increases in productivity—and certain limits on forced overtime, but fails to substantially address workers' concerns over stressful working conditions, longer hours and job security. (See accompanying interview with a Verizon worker from Pittsburgh).

Members will vote on the contracts by mail over the next three weeks.

Despite the predictable pronouncements by union officials that the strike was a “total victory,” the deal was hailed by corporate spokesmen and industry analysts for allowing Verizon to boost workers' output and press ahead with downsizing plans. The agreement “gives us the flexibility we need to compete in the Internet era,” said Verizon's vice president and chairman Lawrence Babbio. “We will now be able to raise the bar on our standards for service and productivity,” he said.

The *Wall Street Journal* wrote that Verizon “maintained the ability to relocate workers to cut costs or respond to changes in the increasingly competitive telecommunications industry. It also gained more flexibility in transferring workers, and gets to pick which installers handle its new DSL services. Verizon considered the latter crucial, given the importance of DSL, which is the phone industry's attempt to gain a share of the market for high-speed Internet access.” As details of the settlement were made public Thursday and Friday, Verizon's stocks rallied—from below $41 a share to above $43.

The deal followed the sabotaging of the strike by the union leadership last weekend. On Sunday night negotiators for the IBEW and CWA-North bargaining units—made up of former NYNEX employees in the New York-New England region—signed a deal with the company. But negotiators for CWA-South—representing former Bell Atlantic employees in the mid-Atlantic states—held out on the issue of forced overtime and what type of work cable splicers and service technicians can do in Pennsylvania. CWA President Bahr was reportedly furious that the negotiators did not go along with the deal.

The CWA and IBEW leadership then called off the walkout by 50,000 New York-New England workers and organized a virtual strikebreaking operation against those who remained on strike in Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia and Washington DC. When striking workers from New Jersey set up picket lines at several Verizon locations in New York City and began winning support from their co-workers, local CWA officials intervened and instructed the New York workers to cross the picket lines. This enabled Verizon to redirect calls for customer service, operators and repair from the strikebound areas in the mid-Atlantic region to New York and New England, effectively erasing any impact of the ongoing strike.

The CWA leadership hurriedly worked to wrap up the strike fearing that angry strikers would expand picketing in New York and New England and re-ignite a full strike. On Tuesday evening Bahr was forced to call for CWA workers to honor picket lines set up by out-of-state workers. In addition to their New Jersey counterparts, strikers from western Pennsylvania, Virginia and Maryland began traveling to New York before the strike was called off Wednesday.

Disgusted with the conduct of the strike most workers stayed off the job in protest on Thursday and many did the same on Friday. Expressing the discontent among rank-and-file workers, Charlie Acker, a New York worker with 30 years service, told the *World Socialist Web Site* it was “practically tyranny” the way the union ran the strike. “There was no discussion,” he continued. “We weren't told anything. On Monday Joe Conley, the vice-president told workers to cross the picket line. It wasn't until Wednesday that they said don't cross.” He added, “We won't see the contract for weeks. Then it will come like a big 300-page book so it's hard to know what the changes are.”

Verizon was formed from the merger of Bell Atlantic (which had previously taken over NYNEX) and GTE in June. Many workers fear that the new company will seek to move work to non-union areas where it can hire workers at lower wages and benefits. The new agreement allows Verizon to transfer about 800 jobs a year out of the bargaining units.

In addition, rather than mandating the hiring of additional workers to reduce workloads and stress, the union agreed to allow the company to transfer work from one call center to another. This allows management to use the threat of such transfers to pit one section of workers against another.

The company gave some ground on the issue of forced overtime, one of the most critical issues for Verizon workers. In the mid-Atlantic states mandatory overtime will be reduced to 8 hours, and 7.5 hours for customer service representatives, per week. In the New York-New England region up to 10 hours of forced overtime will be allowed. The previous contract allowed between 10 and 15 hours of overtime per week. However, an escape clause allows the company to disregard these limits to meet “the needs of the business” has been retained. Moreover, the contract also allows the company to force workers to work overtime with as little as 2 1/2 hours notice.

Customer Service Representatives will be given 30 minutes a day during which time they can turn off their phone to write service orders, report troubles, issue-billing corrections, record a customer's account or any other work associated with a call. At all other times they must be on the phone continuously. An escape clause allowing the disregard of the 30-minute provision is also retained in the contract.

Stressing his commitment to strengthen the union's collaboration with management, CWA President Morton Bahr said the deal “helps sharpen Verizon's competitive edge.” Presenting the CWA as little more than a labor contractor, Bahr added, “The agreement assures Verizon the advantage of a stable workforce of the most highly skilled and experienced people, and in many ways it gives our members the ability to do their jobs even better.”

In exchange for the labor officials' services, Verizon management agreed to an expedited process to allow the CWA to organize workers in its rapidly expanding, and chiefly non-union, wireless division. Presently less than 50 of Verizon's 32,000 wireless workers are unionized. Under the new contract the CWA can organize a quarter of these workers if 55 percent of them sign cards to join. Access to this segment of workers was a crucial aim for the union bureaucracy which has steadily lost dues income and influence within the industry. Since the 1984 breakup of AT&T, the CWA has lost about 100,000 members in telecommunication positions, mainly because of the expansion of non-union operations.