

87,000 US phone workers strike Verizon Communications

Our correspondent
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Over 87,000 workers went on strike against Verizon Communications Sunday morning after contracts between the unions and the country's largest provider of local and wireless service expired at 12:01 a.m. August 6. The strike involves workers in 12 states along the US East Coast.

Negotiators for both Verizon, formed by the merger of Bell Atlantic and GTE in June, and the Communication Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), reported substantial progress during negotiations Sunday and Monday.

A statement issued by the CWA, which represents 72,000 of the striking workers, said negotiations made progress in “job security, expanding opportunity in the growth areas of the company and in organizing rights.”

Job security is a major concern for workers in an industry that experienced major downsizing in the early 90s. Since the merger of Bell Atlantic and GTE the new company has indicated its intention to further cut costs by shifting work to non-union personnel and by merging work centers.

“Job security and keeping jobs is the most importing thing for me,” said Anita Sommers, a technician in Pittsburgh with 26 years service. “We have to stop the electronic transfer of our work. All our work comes in electronically and they can send it anywhere with a flick of a switch. Right now our work has been transferred out of state and they can do that any time they are ready.”

The fastest growth areas for the new company are wireless, data and long distance services, which are largely non-union. Since the merger Verizon Wireless has become the largest wireless provider in the US, with 25 million customers in all 50 states. Revenue for the wireless division alone is expected to grow 86

percent between 1998 and 2003, compared with a 25 percent increase for local services. Only 50 of the 32,000 workers in the wireless division are unionized.

The CWA has placed great emphasis on obtaining the right to organize among wireless workers. Neither the company nor the unions have released details of the talks but the CWA had been seeking an agreement in which the company would recognize the union if half of the wireless employees sign cards expressing their desire to join the union.

The company had been resisting this, saying that no other wireless company is unionized and that such a measure would make the company unable to compete. It is not clear if the company has accepted the union's demand or if it has offered a compromise such as a promise to remain neutral during a union recognition vote.

The union officials' demands for “job security” and unionization have little to do with the defense of secure jobs and decent living standards or working conditions. The CWA and IBEW bureaucracies are chiefly concerned with stemming the loss of further dues income and retaining whatever influence they have left as Verizon positions itself as a major national and international telecommunications provider.

Two years ago, the CWA also made job security the main issue in its contract negotiations with Bell Atlantic. Then the officials demanded the right to represent workers in nonunion subsidiaries set up by the company to build and install lines and equipment. Following a strike the union extended its franchise into many of these areas, but these workers—while paying dues to the CWA—continued to receive only a fraction of the pay and benefits of workers at Bell Atlantic doing the same jobs.

In the current strike the CWA leadership has said

little about the fate of workers at Verizon's data or long distance services. The company is in the process of splitting off these more profitable operations, which include the Internet data services, into separate divisions or companies. This has already happened in New York and is under way in other regions. Verizon intends to retain its less-profitable, and more heavily unionized, local phone service as a separate division, posing the threat that it may be spun off in the future.

In addition to the danger of further downsizing, other issues of concern to the workers are the large amounts of forced overtime, as well as stressful working conditions.

“Our calls are constantly monitored,” said Chris Harding, a repair technician in Pittsburgh. “We are all in a line for calls, as soon as we hang up another call may come in. After I take a call, I may have to write up information, process a service order or something. To do that I have to switch myself off line so I don't get another call. If I am off line for more than 80 seconds, sometimes even less, I get a call from my supervisor wanting to know what I am doing.

“Even if I am on the phone with a customer and it is taking a long time, I will get a call on another line from my supervisor wanting to know what I am doing and why is it taking so long. When we get up to go to the bathroom they are monitoring us and we can't take too long even for that.”

Lorraine Gamble, a technician with two years service, said “We are forced to work eight to ten hours a week overtime. They will come up to you just before the end of your tour and ask if you want to work. If you say ‘no,’ then they will say that you are being forced and then it is insubordination if you don't. Now they just come with statement asking would you like to volunteer or do you want to be forced.

“It is impossible to plan anything, because you never know when you will have to work, even on your days off they can make you work four extra hours.”

Another 24,000 workers at Verizon represented by the CWA, and 15,000 by the IBEW, are not on strike. The contracts of these workers, formerly employees of GTE, don't expire until a later date. However, 1,400 CWA members in Lexington, Kentucky and parts of North Carolina, whose contract has expired, may join the strike.

In addition to being the largest wireless provider,

Verizon operates the largest local phone service in the US and is a major provider of telecommunication services internationally. The company has 63 million access lines going into 33 million households in 31 states plus Washington, DC and Puerto Rico. Internationally, the company operates in over 40 countries and is a major owner of several global fiber optic networks. In 1999, Verizon collected more than \$60 billion in revenue.



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