

"So many people are on Prozac or sick leave because of stress"

Verizon striker describes hi-tech speedup

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The following is an interview with a Verizon worker in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania about the conditions phone workers confront. Patrick has worked for three-and-a-half years as a customer service representative and customer repairperson for Bell Atlantic and then Verizon. He began by denouncing the agreement accepted by the Communication Workers of America for workers in the New York and New England regions.

"We thought that we had something great two years ago in 1998 when they offered us the same thing that they accepted in New York and New England. It was a sellout then and it's a sellout now."

The new contract gives customer service representatives 30 minutes a day, during which time they can turn off their phone to write service orders, report troubles, issue billing corrections, note a customer's account or any other associated work. At all other times they must be taking calls continuously.

"We know all about the 30 minutes that service reps are supposed to get. Those thirty minutes are cancelled everyday. They say that it is too busy. If there is a call in queue you are told that you have to keep on working. That is what happens all day.

"The four percent annual raise that they agreed to is pathetic. It amounts to \$32 a week. They also said that overtime is limited to eight hours per week, but that isn't true. 'The needs of the business clause' is pulled out and they work us lots of hours of overtime. For example, we work an eight-to-five shift. They will tell you at 4 p.m. that you have to work four more hours of overtime. What do you do if you have to pick up your kids from day care or make arrangements for them? That doesn't matter. Everything goes back to the needs of the company.

"You can get an occurrence if you refuse overtime. Two occurrences make a step. Four or five steps lead to losing your job. Of course you could grieve the

occurrence, but will you win? In addition, it goes back to fear, intimidation and stress. They sold us out with New York and New England going back. It made it harder for us."

Patrick described the day-to-day experiences of a customer repair and customer service worker. "For every call that comes in we have to 'assume the sale.' If we do not try to find a need and try to sell the customer a new service then we are disciplined. Depending on the supervisor, you could get a suspension. All of this and completing the repair or customer service order has to be done within specified time constraints. For a customer repairperson the calls have to be down to 300 seconds. Five seconds over and we are reprimanded.

"The company has a sophisticated monitoring system. A person who is in supervisory capacity has a computer. Every person working there has a little block with his or her initials on it. The little block tells them if you are on a call, how long you are on a call, are you in wrap up and how long you have been in wrap up. Wrap up is when you have to detail a repair order for the technician.

"The system that we use for that is antiquated. You can only fit thirty characters in the field or the technician can't read it. So we have to be creative when we are detailing a problem, but we also have to make sure the technician can understand it and read it. The fourth thing that the supervisor monitors is the bathroom. You have to put in a special code when you go to the bathroom. It is only for the bathroom. If you also go to the lounge to get a pop you get suspended. They check the bathrooms to see if we are really in there using them or talking. They give each of us a print out everyday for how long and how many times we went to the bathroom. It is a technological nightmare."

Patrick then described his work duties. "The way that

my job works is that someone calls if they are having trouble with the phone. I enter a report in detail. For example they may tell me that the phone has no dial tone. Then we have a system called 'scrubber.' It reads my report and if the technician says that the line is okay it closes the report. Neither the customer nor I get any notification of this. For example, if it is raining and a line goes out, the customer calls us. We send the report. The line is checked remotely, but if it has stopped raining and the line is checked then it may check out okay. The system reports that the line is okay and the scrubber erases any record of the call.

“Now imagine this. We told a customer that a technician would be out there to take of the problem on Tuesday. That is what we are supposed to do. The system checks the line and 'scrubs' it out. The customer has taken the day off of work to be there for the technician. We are told to give a time of between 8 a.m. and 9 p.m. At 7 p.m. the customer calls us and wants to know where the technician is. That's when it hits the fan. We have nothing in the system. We have absolutely no record of their previous call. We have to take all of the information again and we mark it that it was a 'scrubbed' call and the customer still has the problem. All day long we say 'I'm sorry' and we know why they are angry and they have every right to be. There is no abuse we have not been subjected to. No name or profanity that we have not heard or been called.

“There are not enough technicians to cover the problems anymore because of previous downsizing. Mostly everyone in the business office is on Prozac. So many people are also out on sick leave due to the stress. I transferred out after two years. On Sunday nights I couldn't sleep because I was thinking about going back to work on Monday. That job was hell. Every Monday you would walk in and they would say there are no 30 minutes because it is too backed up.

“You have to constantly make those sales and you have less time to do it in. Now service reps have an hourglass that they have to turn over each time they take a call. They are supposed to complete calls within two and a half minutes. If they have to put someone on hold to check something they are not allowed to put them on hold for more than two minutes. If you do, then a supervisor will come and tap you on the shoulder and tell you that you have to get them off hold. So you

just keep saying, 'still checking hold please' and let them respond so that you know they are still there.”

He also described lack of sick time and the harassment faced by workers who do take off due to illnesses. “There is no sick time. I even fought the union over this. If you have five years or less and you call in sick or leave work sick, then the first day sick is without pay. The next four days are paid. However anything over five days is medical benefits handled by a company called CORE. They decide whether your illness is covered or not. They call and find all sorts of ways to harass the doctors. Doctors don't want to be bothered because it is only when they take phone company employees that they get called and harassed. If they don't say that it is time for you to go back to work, then they send you to a company doctor.”



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