

US: Forced overtime and job security key issues in Verizon strike

Our correspondent
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The Communication Workers of America (CWA) has threatened to break off negotiations if no agreement is reached by Thursday evening in the strike by 87,000 telecommunication workers against Verizon Communications on the East Coast.

CWA negotiators plan “to walk away from bargaining if no movement is made on the key issues. They may go home at midnight tomorrow night,” said CWA spokesperson Candice Johnson. “This is coming from the negotiating table because of their frustration over the pace of the talks,” Johnson told reporters Wednesday.

Forced overtime, job stress and job security have become the central issues in the strike, now in its twelfth day. The CWA, which represents 72,000 of the striking workers, is demanding changes to mandatory overtime that force workers to work an extra 10, 15 and in some cases 20 hours a week in overtime.

Verizon Communications was formed in June by the merger of Bell Atlantic and GTE. The strike by 72,000 members of the CWA and 15,000 members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers began on August 6.

The strike is located in the 12 states from Virginia to Maine and Washington DC that made up the former Bell Atlantic. Another 24,000 workers at Verizon are represented by the CWA, and 15,000 by the IBEW, in areas that were formerly GTE and are not on strike.

Verizon contends that the overtime is necessary to meet customer demands for services in a tight labor market. “We agree that work in our call centers is tough,” said Eric Rabe a spokesperson for Verizon. “The question is: How can we address legitimate issues of job stress and still provide the service that customers want and deserve?”

In New England management can force workers to

work 10 hours a week in overtime and 12 hours during some months of the year. In Pennsylvania management can force workers to work 15 hours a week in overtime during five months of the year, and 10 hours during the remaining seven. In New Jersey there is no cap on the amount of overtime that can be imposed on workers.

Forced overtime has become the rule in many departments, particularly those that handle the fast growing demand for Internet services, and customer contact, such as repair and customer service. Many departments have had maximum overtime forced for several years with management citing “business needs” to prevent workers from transferring to other jobs.

“Management can come up to you as you are getting ready to leave and require you to work another two hours,” said a striking technician in Pittsburgh. “Or on the day before your day off, they can require that you have to work four hours of it.”

Forced overtime has become an issue in many other industries, as companies seek to meet higher demand without the cost of hiring new employees. Government data shows that the workweek has been increasing along with the number of families in which both spouses are working more than 40 hours a week.

In Kentucky, Ft. Wayne, Indiana and the western portion of North Carolina the CWA reached contracts with Verizon last week. In Puerto Rico, 4,800 members of the Independent Union of Telephone Workers have been negotiating for a contract with Verizon for a new contract. GTE bought a majority share of the island's telephone system when it was privatized two years ago.

Verizon has 260,000 employees and is the largest provider of local and wireless service in the United States.



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