

New York Verizon workers rally against city schools contract

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A rally of up to two thousand Verizon workers and some supporters Wednesday protested the approval of a \$120 million contract between the New York City Department of Education (DOE) and Verizon for phone and Internet service at city schools.

The rally was organized by sections of the Democratic Party and the unions for their own narrow interests. However, it attracted a significant layer of Verizon workers who are presently on strike against \$1 billion in concessions demanded by the company.

The contract with the schools has been controversial since a special investigator found that Verizon played a role in the corrupt activities of a former Department of Education technology consultant. The sub-contractor, Willard Lantham, was arrested in April for stealing \$3.6 million from a project to wire the public schools for the Internet. The investigator found that Verizon concealed billing information related to the dealings, though he did not directly implicate Verizon in the theft.

The rally targeted a meeting of the Panel for Education Policy (PEP), which is required to vote on the deal with Verizon. Billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg controls the majority of its members, and the contract with Verizon was approved by a margin of 8-to-4.

The union leaders and politicians who spoke at the rally, including City Comptroller John Liu, a possible Democratic candidate for Mayor, only called for a further delay in the contract until the Verizon strike is over.

Union executives, including Dennis Hughes, the president of the New York State AFL-CIO, used the opportunity to posture as supporters of the Verizon workers, even as they work to isolate the strikers. The AFL-CIO has done nothing to mobilize broader support

against the strike-breaking operations of Verizon. Their main activity was the holding of a "candlelight vigil" outside of the house of Verizon CEO on Thursday night.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of the Verizon workers attending the rally.

Michi, a customer service representative with 15 years at Verizon, said, "This rally is about justice and fairness. We are union workers who work hard. We have made this corporation rich. Verizon is a billion dollar corporation. Taking \$20,000 from a worker is too much. We are not even asking for an increase."

About the court injunctions limiting picketing, she said: "They say how our picketing is too aggressive, and it is too much. We are voicing our opinions and letting everyone know what is going on. The public is with us. They know we are the ones who are making this company go. We want everybody to come out and support us. We are the working class, and we want everyone to come out and support us."

"I would like a mass picket like this demonstration to shut down our office. We are representing everybody."

"As much as the company wants to spread rumors about sabotage and vandalism, we are not doing it," she added.

"When everything was happening in Wisconsin, I saw it, but I didn't really realize the effects of this until it has hit us now. All of us need to stand together and tell those corporations that they are not going to get us to back away and take this."

"What has happened to Gerry Horgan [a CWA striker who was killed on a picket line in 1989] and the people getting hit on the picket line is terrible. This is emotional. But everyone has to choose sides. We are going to stand up and represent all the people who have died before and fight the corporate greed. It is all about

corporate greed."

Odette, a 20-year customer service rep at West Street, commented, "This demonstration is to show that we are strong and won't budge because they won't compromise. We will fight for our rights. I think Verizon should be shut down on the picket line. Limiting the number of people on the picket line is a violation of our Constitutional rights. We cannot even bring our children or our teenagers to the picket line."

She explained, "The reason we are on strike is because they want to take away everything in our contract. They want to take our compensation, our disability, our vacation.

"Things like phone lines going down at various places happen on a daily basis. I don't think the sabotage charges are true. They are trying to sway the public into believing their phone lines and other facilities can work without us."

Speaking on the crisis in public education, Odette added, "Schools are in danger. There are too many students in every classroom. There are too many students with special needs. The textbooks are insufficient and inappropriate. What I mean by inappropriate is that the textbooks are written for the wrong grade level or for the wrong reading level."

Greg added, "They are trying to fix the company by bringing us down. Money goes to money. The Verizon executives and the politicians are the guys who make big bucks. It is like they have their own little union."



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