

The betrayal of the Verizon strike

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The decision by the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) to end the strike by 45,000 Verizon workers demonstrates that workers cannot mount a successful fight against the attacks of the corporations unless they break free of the organizational stranglehold of the official trade unions.

Even by the miserable standards of the AFL-CIO, the calling off of the strike after two weeks without a new contract or a retraction by the company of any of its vicious concessions demands stands out as a demonstration of the unions' cynicism and treachery.

Verizon has made clear that it has not withdrawn its demands for \$1 billion in concessions, including the elimination of pensions for new-hires and the freezing of pensions for current workers, huge increases in workers' health care costs, the elimination of all job security provisions, a reduction in sick days, and an end to all restrictions on outsourcing.

Workers will return under an agreement that eliminates caps on overtime, allowing the company to work them mercilessly in order to make up for lost time and the impact of storms in the US Northeast. The unions have called off the strike without securing the reinstatement of workers suspended by the company for alleged strike-related activities or the dropping of charges against workers arrested on the picket line.

They have stipulated as part of the back-to-work deal, under which the company has agreed to retain the old contract while negotiations continue for a new one, that in the event of a resumption of the strike, all of the strikebreaking injunctions will remain in force.

The claim by the unions that the strike forced Verizon to "bargain seriously" is a fraud. To the extent that it means anything, it signifies that the company has said it is willing to discuss the union officials' agenda for maintaining their dues base in exchange for the unions' collaboration in imposing concessions that will cost the workers thousands of dollars a year.

The timing of the decision to end the strike underscores the completely manipulative character of the unions' actions.

They ended the strike just as the workers were to become eligible for union-paid strike benefits, and at a point where the walkout was beginning to seriously affect the operations of the company. The result—the workers sacrifice two weeks' pay with nothing to show for it, while the union executives lose not a penny of their six-figure salaries.

There was another consideration. As the unions, the company and the Obama administration well knew, the longer the workers remained on the picket line, the greater the danger that the strike would escape the control of the unions and become the focal point for a broader struggle of the working class against the corporations and the government.

As the strike developed, the class lineup became increasingly clear. The company called on the resources of the state, including the courts and the police, to enforce antidemocratic injunctions severely limiting picketing. The Obama administration backed Verizon's unsubstantiated charges of striker "sabotage," launching an FBI investigation and linking the alleged actions of Verizon workers to the upcoming tenth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

While Verizon workers demonstrated determination and solidarity in the face of the government-corporate strikebreaking operation, the CWA and IBEW did nothing to oppose it. The AFL-CIO virtually ignored the biggest US labor walkout in years, isolating the struggle and refusing to mobilize broader support in the working class.

The actions of the unions were determined by the social interests they represent. These organizations can no longer be characterized as "working class." They have long ceased to defend the interests of workers, nor are they subject to the democratic control of workers. These so-called unions function as corporate-labor syndicates run by wealthy upper-middle-class executives who share in the profits extracted through the exploitation of the working class, serving as junior partners of corporate management and the state.

For thirty years, since their betrayal of the PATCO air traffic controllers strike in 1981, the unions have overseen one defeat after another. As social inequality has soared and the ruling class has dismantled huge swaths of the industrial

infrastructure in order to concentrate on financial speculation, the unions have single-mindedly devoted themselves to suppressing the class struggle. The fact that the Verizon strike was one of only a handful of significant strikes over the past decade, and the first since the financial collapse of 2008, is itself an indictment of the AFL-CIO.

The collapse of the unions—whose membership in the private sector has fallen to levels not seen since the first decade of the last century—and their transformation into direct agencies of the corporations and the state is history's verdict on the viability of a labor movement based on the defense of capitalism and nationalism.

The seeds of the collapse of the unions were sown in the rejection by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)—the industrial unions that arose out of explosive sit-down strikes and mass struggles of American workers during the 1930s Depression—of the independent political organization of the working class and of any challenge to capitalist ownership of the means of production. This reactionary political foundation—materialized in the unions' alliance with the Democratic Party, one of the two parties of US big business—was reinforced in the purge of socialist and left-wing elements from the unions after World War II. It was consummated in the unification of the CIO and the old American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1955 on the explicit basis of opposition to socialism and defense of American imperialism.

After the war, under conditions of the global dominance of American capitalism and the postwar boom, workers were able to win economic improvements within the framework of the official unions. But by the late 1960s and 1970s, American capitalism had already entered a period of protracted decline. In the following decade, the American ruling class launched an offensive against the working class that has continued unabated ever since.

The immense development of economic globalization of the past thirty years has further undermined the unions and all of the old labor bureaucracies that based themselves on the national state and national economy.

Writing in 1937, Trotsky noted that the character of a trade union is determined by “its relation to the distribution of national income.” Should the union officials “defend the income of the bourgeoisie from attacks on the part of workers; should they conduct a struggle against strikes, against the raising of wages, against help to the unemployed, then we would have an organization of scabs, and not a trade union.”

The Verizon strike is one more demonstration that this is, in fact, the role of the official unions today. These organizations are not only useless from the standpoint of defending the workers' interests; they are a determined

obstacle to any such fight.

The ending of the Verizon strike takes place as the ruling class is intensifying its assault on the working class. The Obama administration has already reached an agreement with the Republicans for \$2.4 trillion in cuts to social programs. This is only an initial step in a campaign to dismantle government health care and pension programs. Even as the AFL-CIO, including the CWA and IBEW, prepare for an all-out campaign to reelect Obama, the president is pushing for even greater cuts.

And as Obama rejects any serious measures to create jobs or provide relief to the unemployed, corporations like Verizon use the jobs crisis as a lever to eliminate benefits, reduce wages and intensify the exploitation of workers.

Workers will resist this attack, but a new road of struggle must be found.

In the course of the two-week strike, the Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site* waged an aggressive campaign among Verizon workers. The success of the strike, we insisted, required the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of and in opposition to the trade unions. It was necessary to mobilize the entire working class, transforming the struggle into a mass movement against the dictates of the corporate and financial elite. This perspective won an increasingly sympathetic hearing among Verizon workers.

In the coming weeks, the SEP will escalate its fight for the independent industrial and political mobilization of the working class. We will fight for Verizon workers to reject the rotten agreement the unions are preparing to push through.

The official unions may succeed in ending the Verizon strike, but in doing so they only further discredit themselves and open the way for workers to break free of their stranglehold and take the road of political struggle against the capitalist system and for socialism.

What is required above all is the building of a new political leadership, one that bases itself on a rejection of the capitalist system, in which every economic and political institution is controlled by a ruling class determined to impoverish the vast majority of the population. We urge all workers and young people who see the need for such a fight to read our program and make the decision to join the Socialist Equality Party.

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