ISO covers for unions' betrayal of Verizon strike

Jerry White
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The August 21 decision by the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) to end the 13-day-old Verizon strike was a historic betrayal of the 45,000 workers fighting to defend their jobs, living standards and working conditions and the entire working class.

The CWA-IBEW back-to-work order—while Verizon management remains committed to all its concessionary demands and threatens to victimize dozens of workers for alleged strike-related activity—has generated anger among workers and deepened the growing disgust with the existing unions.

Under these conditions, the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization (ISO) has jumped to the defense of the CWA and IBEW, in the hope of blocking a rebellion by workers against these discredited organizations. Whatever mild criticisms the ISO offers of the CWA and IBEW leaders are more than offset by their underhanded *but relentless* insistence that workers have no choice but to accept the framework of the existing unions. This is a right-wing policy, which, if followed, would have disastrous consequences for wide layers of the population.

In an August 21 article, "Why did the unions retreat at Verizon?" the labor editor of the ISO publication *Socialist Worker*, Lee Sustar, provides an apologia for the unions' stab in the back and argues that workers should look to the CWA and IBEW to defend their interests.

The language employed in the article is revealing. The unions, the headline informs us, have made a "retreat" at Verizon. Later, Sustar complains about the unions' "cautious approach," adding that the CWA and IBEW "shied away from" conducting a wholehearted struggle. The unions, we are told, "cut short a promising strike." The theme of the article is that by "renewing and rebuilding the union's muscle," as Sustar puts it, i.e., applying pressure on the union officialdom, the present situation can be remedied.

The sudden calling off of the strike with no contract in place, begins Sustar, has left "strikers and supporters asking 'why,' as they debate how to continue the fight for a good contract while back on the job."

Before offering his explanation as to why the unions shut down the strike, Sustar seeks to downplay the significance of the CWA-IBEW strikebreaking, suggesting that some "union activists" are proposing work-to-rule campaigns once workers return to their jobs and reassuring Verizon workers that "the unions retain the ability to strike at any time." In other words, things are not so bad!

Sustar works to prevent his readers from drawing any sharp conclusions about the treachery of the unions, suggesting that CWA President Larry Cohen and other officials would like to defend the interests of workers, but suffer from "limited aims" and inadequate tactics.

It should be kept in mind, when considering dishonest and "diplomatic" articles such as Sustar's, that ISO members and supporters, operating in and around the unions, rub shoulders with various top or middle-rank officials on a daily basis. In March 2010, for example, *Socialist Worker* reported positively on a conference held by the phony Labor Campaign for Single-Payer Healthcare, sponsored by the AFL-CIO and a magnet for all manner of middle-class "activists," including the ISO membership. One of the speakers, whose remarks were cited favorably by *Socialist Worker*, was none other than Mr. Cohen.

Sustar acknowledges that the CWA did not call the strike to oppose the telecom giant's attack on pensions, health care benefits and jobs, but merely to make the company "negotiate seriously." In fact, as Sustar admits, the CWA had already agreed to similar demands at Verizon's competitor, AT&T, forcing 100,000 workers to accept "an end to pensions for new hires in some regions and a requirement that workers pay a share of health insurance premiums for the first time."

Blithely setting this not insignificant fact aside, Sustar holds out the prospect that the unions will somehow turn around and fight. "If the unions at Verizon hold the line, it will be a rallying point for workers, union and non-union, who are looking for a way to resist the downward pressure on their living standards since the recession began nearly

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four years ago." Where is the slightest indication that the unions will "hold the line"?

Sustar cites CWA organizer Steve Early, a supporter of the *Labor Notes* publication, who simply cannot understand why the CWA and IBEW coupled their suspension of the strike with the "ill-advised curtailment" of appeals to non-striking Verizon Wireless workers.

"For reasons that remain murky at the moment," Early says, UNITE HERE president John Wilhelm called off all support activities and AFL-CIO-affiliated "Jobs With Justice" director Sarita Gupta ordered that "all leafleting at stores, work sites and other events' must 'cease,'" even though, Early laments, "none of that is barred by the back-to-work agreement."

In fact, there is nothing murky about any of this. The CWA, IBEW and AFL-CIO shut down the strike precisely at the point when it was beginning to win wider support and have a significant impact on Verizon's operations. Union executives, including the CWA's Cohen, were only concerned with retaining a "seat at the table" with Verizon management and continuing to deduct dues from workers' paychecks. Once the company indicated it was willing to use the services of the unions to accomplish its cost-cutting aims, the CWA and IBEW called off the strike to demobilize and soften workers up for the sweeping concessions the union will now, in one form or another, accept.

Sustar and the ISO know this full well. Yet they feign surprise, suggesting that the CWA-IBEW actions are inexplicable coming from an organization supposedly on the side of the working class. Reacting nervously to the growing revulsion felt by many workers for "their" unions, Sustar proceeds to concoct his case for the unions' defense.

During a conference call with Verizon shop stewards, our author notes, the CWA's Cohen said "that the fight for a good contract would continue." (In fact, the CWA never conceived of, much less began, such a fight.) Sustar goes on to explain that Cohen "described the support the strike received as evidence of a new democracy movement in the US, referring to the Wisconsin labor protests in defense of public-sector workers' collective bargaining rights. He put the Verizon struggle in the context of the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia."

"Yet by comparing the Verizon fight to these bold struggles," Sustar declares, "Cohen only highlighted the defensiveness of the unions' strategy."

Hence, according to Sustar and the ISO, Cohen and other union officials would like to conduct a serious struggle (perhaps even a social revolution!), but their approach is just a bid timid.

Referring politely to the union leaders as "advocates of limited strikes," Sustar asserts that CWA officials were worried they would have to help the IBEW pay strike benefits because the latter union did not have its own fund. Moreover, because Verizon could sustain a long strike by using profits from its wireless division, union officials felt, he writes, it was "better to have a short strike that can disrupt operations without entering into a costly war of attrition." Sustar presents these miserable, cowardly excuses to his readers as legitimate, if misguided, positions, as part of the effort to provide an alibi for the CWA-IBEW.

It is true, of course, that one of the major factors determining the strike's brutal cancellation was the desire of CWA officials not to pay out (meager) strike benefits. Instead, they much prefer to keep the cash to pad the six-digit salaries and upper-middle-class lifestyles of Cohen and company.

"Apparently," Sustar continues, "CWA and IBEW leaders don't believe that the union can make a forthright public defense of the gains its members have won over the decades, whether it's a defined-benefit pension or employer-paid health care premiums."

But the unions are not interested in defending these gains, publicly or in any other way. Committed to upholding the capitalist system, the union executives fully agree that workers must give up pensions, health benefits and whatever else is necessary to shore up the profits of the corporations.

The last thing in the world the affluent managers who head the unions want is a movement that could escape their control and disrupt their corporatist relations with big business. Moreover, with the CWA and other unions preparing to go all out for the reelection of Barack Obama, a serious struggle at Verizon had the potential to develop into a confrontation with the current administration in Washington, which backs the drive by the corporations to slash health care benefits and other costs.

From the beginning of the strike, the ISO concealed the role of the unions and the big political questions confronting Verizon workers. Its suggestion that the union officials are legitimate working class leaders and only need rank-and-file pressure to fight is aimed at tying workers to these anti-labor organizations. This only underscores the fact that the ISO has nothing to do with socialism and is just as hostile to the interests of the working class as the union apparatuses themselves.

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