Unions prepared to end Verizon strike without a contract

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Verizon is escalating its strike-breaking tactics against 45,000 workers who began their strike on Sunday. On Thursday night the company won a court injunction in New Jersey preventing workers from taking measures to disrupt business activity. The order follows similar injunctions in Delaware, New York and Pennsylvania.

The injunctions limit picketing and place other restrictions on the workers. Verizon is also expanding its propaganda offensive, including allegations of "sabotage."

On Friday, the Obama administration's Justice Department intervened to back this propaganda campaign. In a provocative statement suggesting that the alleged actions by workers were akin to terrorism, Special Agent Bryan Travers said in an email, "Because critical infrastructure has been affected, namely the telecommunications of both a hospital and a police department, the FBI is looking into this matter from a security standpoint as part of our security efforts leading up to the 9-11 anniversary."

The striking Verizon workers have shown great determination in the face of this attack and the attempt by the company to impose $1 billion in concessions, including the freezing of pensions, increases in health care costs, and the elimination of job security provisions.

The Communications Workers of American (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), however, have made clear that they are prepared to end the strike without any agreement from the company.

The unions "are prepared to return to work when the company demonstrates that it's ready to bargain fairly," the CWA reported in a press release on Thursday. This would mean an end to the strike without a contract, followed by negotiations between the union and the company on the concessions to be imposed on the workers. The CWA has not even released a list of demands that must be taken off the table before a resumption of work.

"Our strike is to force Verizon to get serious about bargaining," said Candice Johnson, the CWA communications director at the beginning of a conference call Thursday evening. CWA President Larry Cohen made clear that the strike was not about winning demands. "We will go back when there is serious bargaining," he said, "because that is why we went on strike—to get them to bargain."

On Friday, the CWA filed an unfair labor practice charge against Verizon, seeking a federal order to require the company to bargain "in good faith."

The unions have made repeated references to Wisconsin and other states that moved to eliminate collective bargaining rights as part of a wholesale attack on the working class earlier this year.

"This is an enormously profitable company," said CWA District 1 Legislative and Political Director Bob Mater, "which we believe is trying to take advantage of an anti-union environment and, in a sense, to replicate at a giant private-sector corporation what the governors of Ohio, New Jersey and Wisconsin have been trying to do to the public sector."

In the Wisconsin dispute, the unions worked to undermine mass protests and strikes by workers and students against budget cuts demanded by Republican Governor Scott Walker. They insisted that the issue was not the cuts but the "right to bargain," by which

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they meant not the defense of the workers, but rather the defense of the narrow interests of the union executives, whose overriding goal was to preserve their dues base.

The unions worked closely with the Democratic Party in Wisconsin, which also made clear its support for cuts in social programs and education. After Walker's anti-worker bill was rammed through the Wisconsin legislature in March, unions throughout the state moved quickly to sign contracts that imposed concessions while preserving the automatic deduction of union dues from workers' paychecks. The unions promoted the diversionary tactic of a recall campaign to channel workers' anger behind the Democrats.

The attitude of the unions to the Verizon strike is of the same character. They are willing to push drastic concessions on the workers—as they have done at other companies, including AT&T—in exchange for guarantees that protect their own interests.

The AFL-CIO, meanwhile, has done nothing to mobilize broader support for the Verizon workers, virtually ignoring the strike on its web site. No solidarity actions have been called for one of the largest strikes involving US workers in the past decade. Despite the AFL-CIO's huge reserves, there has been no suggestion of aiding the striking workers financially. The workers are not presently receiving any strike pay, and will get only $100-$200 after three weeks off the job.

A call to the AFL-CIO on Friday seeking comment was not returned.

The unions have little desire for a prolonged strike at Verizon, and certainly not a victorious one. They are working closely with the Obama administration and the corporations to increase the exploitation of the working class.

Verizon is only following on the model set by Obama in 2009 with the forced bankruptcy of General Motors and Chrysler: to use the economic crisis as an opportunity to reverse the social gains won by the working class in previous struggles. After collaborating with Obama in the restructuring of the auto industry, which led to the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs, cuts in benefits, and poverty-level wages for new-hires, the United Auto Workers is offering to end guaranteed pay increases in current contract talks with the Big Three auto companies.

In the wake of Obama's agreement with the Republicans to cut $2.4 trillion in health care and other social programs—only a down payment on the gutting of social programs that benefit the working class—the unions, including the CWA, are ramping up their efforts to reelect Obama and the Democrats in the 2012 elections. They oppose the building of a working class alternative to the two right-wing parties of big business.

For the Verizon workers' fight to be successful it must be connected to a broader struggle of workers against the dictates of the corporations and banks. This requires a break with the trade unions and the building of independent rank-and-file committees to broaden the strike and mobilize working class support nationally and internationally, and a political mobilization of the entire working class against the Democrats and Republicans and the capitalist profit system they defend.

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