

Workers denounce union shutdown of Verizon strike

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The two unions involved in negotiations with Verizon have agreed to shut down picket lines and send their 45,000 members back to work beginning Monday night, without any agreement from the company to withdraw \$1 billion in concession demands.

The move is an effort by the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) to demobilize the two-week-long struggle of Verizon workers as it was beginning to gain broader support and significantly impact the company's operations. The shutdown of picketing sets the stage for the union to agree to sharp cuts in health care and pensions, along with the elimination of job security. (See, "The betrayal of the Verizon strike".)

Verizon, which made \$22 billion in profits over the past four years, is seeking to freeze pensions for all workers and eliminate pensions for new hires, sharply increase health care costs, and eliminate job security, along with dozens of additional demands.

Many Verizon workers responded to the announcement with a mixture of shock, suspicion and anger, particularly as details of the back-to-work agreement began to come out.

"This is ridiculous. If we were winning, why should we go back?" asked Sean, a central office technician in the Pittsburgh area, in a telephone interview. "The company hasn't moved on anything," he added. "They're still demanding that our pensions be cut, that we pay for health care and that they be allowed to cut jobs."

Sean said the CWA was not defending its members. "The union just cares about making sure that dues keep coming in." A significant factor in ending the strike was that the Verizon workers were not paying dues while off the job. The CWA, moreover, had to begin

paying strike pay after the second week.

Other workers shared their feelings in online discussions. "The moral of the story is, never think the union has your best interest at heart," one Verizon worker said on a Facebook page set up by the CWA. "In my opinion, the union got something very nice in return for letting us fall."

Once workers return from the strike, existing caps on overtime will be suspended. The return-to-work order states, "For one week following the Return to Work Date, the provisions of the CBAs [collective bargaining agreements] regarding overtime caps will not be in effect in order to reduce the work backlog resulting from the strike."

This, too, garnered outrage, "No overtime caps the first week?? They are going to kill us," wrote one Verizon worker posting in a Facebook group devoted to the strike.

"I fear that as soon as we clean up the work load, the company will stop bargaining. Is this the best we could do?" another worker asked. Verizon lines have been disrupted by a series of storms in the region over the past few days.

In the event of another strike, the return-to-work agreement includes a voluntary agreement by the union to abide by the antidemocratic court injunctions issued against the striking workers. The injunctions limit the number and size of pickets, together with other restrictions on strike activity. The return-to-work order states, "The Company and the Union agree to abide by the terms of the consent orders and injunctions that were in effect prior to the Return to Work Date."

The CWA noted in its Saturday conference that eighty workers would lose their jobs due to "allegations of misconduct" during the strike. The return-to-work agreement states, "The parties will meet to discuss the

evidence and attempt to resolve any disputes over the imposition of discipline prior to a final determination by the Company on disciplinary action.” This means, explicitly, that the discretion over victimizing strikers will be left to the company, and that these workers have been entirely abandoned by the unions.

Many workers criticized the backdoor character of the negotiations. “I say we vote to have the negotiations made public to all union members... Where is the transparency?” asked one worker on the CWA’s Facebook page. “There is too much that we are not being told.”

Another worker asked, “Why are we always left in the dark about things, except for what they want us to know? A couple of contracts ago, CWA stayed out of work for over 3 weeks, and we returned back to work with the same agreement that was offered by the company in the 1st place... I have *never* understood that, and never received a reasonable explanation for it.”

Several expressed dismay that they did not know what was in the agreement. “We’re not getting any information from the locals telling us what has been negotiated or not,” one worker wrote.

“For the past decade, the union has sided with the company on virtually every issue,” wrote another. “I have no doubt all of the concessions will be on the union’s side of the contract, where any concessions by the company will be from their wish list of the things they want. How is that a win for any union members? We are *so* screwed. *Again!!*”

Another, feeling somewhat marginalized, asked, “I guess I am the only one being optimistic thinking our union leaders will get this done and done for us?”

Neither the unions nor the company announced any changes to Verizon’s demands as a result of the agreement. The union has not announced any demands of its own since the beginning of the strike, insisting that the only issue was “bargaining.”

The CWA said in a statement Saturday afternoon that “We have reached agreement with Verizon on how bargaining will proceed and how it will be restructured,” adding, “The major issues remain to be discussed.”

Verizon said it was satisfied with the union’s desire to shut down the strike. “The union asked us to allow the workforce back to work, and we agreed, with the

terms being that they could work under the previous contract,” said Verizon spokesman Rich Young in a telephone interview Sunday.

Young said that the previous contract, which expired August 6, would be extended for 30 days, while negotiations are ongoing. He said he could not comment on what would happen after the temporary extension lapses.

When asked whether the company would be pursuing more lenient demands, Young said that, with regard to the company’s overall strategy “The agenda is the same.” He added that, “We have made progress on certain issues. We still have critical issues on the table: benefits, work rules, job security,” although he said he could not provide specific details.



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