Verizon workers denounce union agreement to end strike

A WSWS reporting team
29 August 2011

Verizon and Communications Workers of American (CWA) and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) are set to resume negotiations this week on major concessions demanded by the company. The discussions are starting one week after the unions called off a strike of 45,000 workers in the US Northeast without any agreement from the company to withdraw any of its demands.

The end of the strike, justified by the unions on the ground that management is now prepared to "bargain seriously" is the preparation by the unions for accepting all the major demands of the company. Verizon is seeking $1 billion in cuts, including sharp reductions in health care, pensions and other benefits, and the elimination of job security.

There is widespread unease and anger over the return to work. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of workers in New York City after the return to work.

Roxanne, a customer service representative at West Street, said, "I think we should have stayed out on strike until our negotiations were settled and until Verizon gives up all the 100 takeaways now on the table. In addition, I think we deserve a raise. But the union didn't ask for anything."

Roxanne described the increased exploitation of workers in recent years. "They have cut the workforce, and this means more work for us, the workers who remain. This makes it harder for our customers as well.

"I don't expect we will go out on strike again. I expect everything will be settled at the bargaining table. At the same time, I don't think things will be settled in our favor at the bargaining table if we aren't out on strike."

Workers at West Street were angry to learn that 80 workers were being disciplined for actions during the strike and have not been allowed to return to work. Their back-to-work agreement signed by the unions leaves their ultimate fate at the hands of the company.

Ricardo, a central office technician in New York, said, "They should have come back with us. Some of them may have suits against the company because they got hit by managers' cars on the picket lines. It has been reported that a number of employees were hit by scabs. It was also reported that Verizon security personnel got into an altercation with a worker, and the worker got hurt.

He added, "There was a Facebook page that workers might have gotten disciplined for writing on. It was a CWA strike page that described how scabs couldn't do the work or were doing it inadequately. It has been shut down. There were also YouTube videos posted showing managers blowing up transformers on telephone poles. These people may have been disciplined as well.

On the unions, Ricardo said, "I already knew from the beginning that the union would force us back to work without a settlement. I heard [CWA president] Larry Cohen say this from Day 1. He said that we walked off because Verizon wouldn't 'bargain in good faith.' Once he could say they would 'bargain in good faith,' he forced us back with no settlement."

Tonja, a customer service representative, said, "I wondered why we stopped the strike too. There was a quantifiable drop in service. There were people switching from FIOS [fiber optics] to cable. I didn't understand why we went back. We are in a worse position now than when we started.

"We walked out when the union was making all these accusations and demands. And now we have nothing and have been sent back to work. The company has lost nothing, but we have lost two weeks of pay."

On strike pay, which CWA workers did not receive during the strike, Tonja noted, "The union did pay us $240, but it was the day that we got back to work on Tuesday.

"I think the company would have faced a crisis if we stayed out. The people answering the phones were clueless. But the bigger crisis they were facing was a public relations crisis. When you juxtaposed the pay, benefits and perks of the top executives to what we really make, Verizon's image for what they are doing is tarnished.

"New CEO McAdam came from Verizon Wireless where there is no union. When Wireless workers tried to get better conditions there, Verizon and McAdam told them if they tried to organize the company would fire them. He is trying to bring the business practices of the Wireless side here.

"What will happen now because the union has sent us back to work with nothing settled, is that people will think we are flip floppers. We have now gone back, but I don't know why. The union says we have gone back because Verizon says it will bargain seriously, but I'm quite sure they were serious from the beginning.

"There is real trepidation because we don't know what is going to happen next, and we fear what that might be. What I really expect is that they will cut our health insurance, have a wage freeze for two years, get rid of job security, push sales a lot in every department to make each one revenue producing, and cut our disability insurance and family leave rights. I don't think the company is going to give up any of the 100 takeaways they want. The only question is how much of each are they going to try to take. The days of feeling secure

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because we are in a union are gone.

"If the union came back with these takeaways, the ranks might accept them because the media will be filled with interviews of people saying, 'They should be happy with this. They are better off than most.' The union forcing us back after two weeks has demoralized the workforce. We had a good head of steam up. We had righteous indignation. We would not have accepted any deal like this.

"Now the righteous indignation is gone. I hope people won't accept this kind of a deal, and they will revive the righteous indignation.

"The union is trying to undermine this. They don't want to fight this fight. I don't know if they don't want to lose face or what the reason is.

"It is like one group of haves—Verizon and the companies—are fighting another group of haves—the unions. And this is all at the expense of the workers. The company and the unions don't lose a lot, but we are caught in the middle and lose a lot.

"I would love if there is an alternative working class party. But the majority of people might not understand and would need to be educated. The problem is the government is no longer afraid of the people. It pays no heed to the people. People feel impotent. They don't know what they can do. They don't know how to change things, and then they feel apathetic.

"People need to be educated about socialism before they denounce it. If people stopped for a minute to think about socialism, and put as much effort thinking about a party that would benefit them as they do in buying a car or a computer, we would be better off."

Gary has worked for Verizon for 15 years in digital cross connection.

"What Verizon does not want anyone to know is that the wireless system depends on the landline infrastructure? They make their profits on the high quality of the landline, which was built by union workers.

"Verizon says that they pay $4 billion on medical benefits, and they want us to pay for that. But with the increase in deductibles, we have already been contributing to our health benefits. The point is that now they are demanding that we also pay premiums.

"Right now we are working under the old contract, but that is for only 30 days. Who knows what well happen after 30 days?

"During the first week of the strike when Obama was here in New York City, we were told that for the sake of unity, we had to stop picketing. If Obama and the Democrats were for the workers, he would have come here in support of our strike. Why does a multi-billionaire like Warren Buffet give support to the Obama administration? The union gives money to the Democrats and tells us to vote for them. But both parties are clearly not for working people."

Desiree, a Verizon worker from Brooklyn said, "I think we should not have gone back without a contract. It undermines the two weeks we were out. We have nothing, and we have to start over again. I don't trust this situation. I don't trust the union. I don't trust any of them.

"I think the strike was having an effect. We were gaining a lot of support. It brought them to the table to talk about the real issues. The union bent. The company gave them a little crumb.

"My major issue is job security. I saw that McAdam said they want to keep outsourcing our jobs. He said it would be better customer service to flip a switch and send the calls somewhere else like the Philippines or India. I blame the companies, not the workers in other countries for this. Workers there want jobs and need to feed their families. The companies want to pay workers overseas next to nothing.

"This is the way the country is going. It is so bad. It affects everyone, the small businesses, the neighborhoods, and our children if we don't get our pay. Other people will be looking at this all over the country. Con Ed workers have a contract coming up next year. What happens to those workers if Verizon gets these takeaways from us?

"We didn't ask for anything more than what we had. I don't understand this greed. It is so deadly, and there is no end of it. If we keep what we already have this company would not suffer. The recession has never hurt Verizon. If you don't go along with what the corporations want, then the government helps them because the government is scared the companies will move away. The companies don't pay any taxes.

"That is what they want to do with the wealth in this country. The wealthy want there to be just the filthy rich and the dirty poor.

"We should have never gone back without job security because without that there is nothing else. If you go back and within two weeks they lay you off, what will protect you? If Verizon stops 'bargaining in good faith' in the next 30 days, and I don't believe they ever did, the public perception will be that we are the ones who appear greedy because Verizon was appearing to be 'bargaining in good faith,' and then we would walk away again.

"The people in the union are getting greedy and fat just like the companies. We have no protection from them. We have to fight against them as well. They don't tell you anything. They just leave you in the dark hearing rumors.

"They say socialism is such a bad thing, but what is so bad about wanting to help others? People should have health care and jobs. This is capitalism, but here everyone doesn't have the opportunity to share the wealth. They try to justify capitalism and say it is good because doesn't everyone want to make money and more money? What they don't say is that the people making this money and more money are doing it at the expense of people they are driving into poverty."

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