

Verizon union gears up for sellout at US telecom

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Last month, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) union held a rally outside of telecom corporation Verizon's headquarters on Sixth Avenue in New York City. Over 1,000 workers attended the December 4 rally organized by District One, a subdivision within CWA comprised of various CWA locals in New York and New England. The labor agreement covering 40,000 Verizon workers in the eastern United States expires in August.

The ostensible purpose of the rally according the organizers at CWA was twofold.

Firstly, the rally was built as a remembrance of the 1989 strike against what was then NYNEX, a forerunner to Verizon in New York. That strike had been particularly bitter with chief steward Gerry Horgan losing his life on the picket line in Valhalla, New York after a strikebreaker ran him over.

The main issue of the strike had been the shifting of medical costs from the company to employees. The CWA leadership is now seeking to use the sacrifice, solidarity and determination expressed by workers during that long battle as a cover for the betrayal of the current struggle facing Verizon workers. Union officials sought conceal to this by handing out signs at the rally reading, "We walked then, we will strike again."

In fact, the CWA used the 1989 strike to cement its corporatist relationship with the company, seeking to prove that it could be depended upon to suppress the militancy of the workers and that the union was willing to work with the companies in cutting jobs, wages and benefits. In particular, the CWA ended the tradition of calling a national strike against the telecommunication giants and ordered tens of thousands of workers in Pennsylvania, Virginia, Washington, DC and Maryland back to work after just three weeks, leaving the strikers

in the New York and New England regions isolated during their 17-week strike.

The result has been the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs and cuts in wages, benefits and pensions for those remaining. In 1989, the CWA and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) represented over 140,000 telecommunication workers in the 13 states where Verizon operates. Today that number has fallen to 40,000 and is continuing to drop.

The second purported reason for the rally was said to be the beginning of a "mobilization" for the upcoming contract talks when the current collective bargaining agreement, which is set to expire in early August. "Mobilization" is the union's term for its channeling the anger and frustration felt by workers over the ongoing assault on jobs and living standards by Verizon into harmless protests, while the union prepares to make major concessions on pensions and health benefits.

The main speaker at the rally was the president of CWA District 1, Chris Shelton, who is seeking to replace retiring CWA national president Larry Cohen. The rank-and-file does not get to vote for the national leader of the CWA. Rather a successor is selected by the executive boards of the various locals, many of whose leaders also spoke at the rally. The entire affair had the feel of an election campaign.

The Democratic Party Manhattan Borough president Gail Brewer and New York City councilperson Ben Kallos turned out to support the union leaders. Their efforts amounted to mouthing vague statements about pressuring Verizon to expand and improve customer service.

There is a bitter irony in the commemoration the 1989 strike. In 2011, the CWA bureaucracy shut down

the strike and sent workers back to work without a contract. This resulted in a contract with a miniscule wage increase, givebacks on work rules and concessions on the medical benefits which had been fought for in the 1989 strike.

As for the “mobilization” effort, several rank and file CWA members at the rally told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the union is now trying to sell workers management’s demands for unpopular work-rule changes. Several workers said in disgust the most common statement from their union leaders about these changes is “they can do that.”

Michael Schmidt, a field technician, has worked at Verizon for 19 years. He told us, “With the recent contracts there haven’t been any raises to meet inflation. The last contract was horrible. Verizon made \$11 billion in profit, but what they wanted was 100 takeaways from us. It is hard enough to make it through life as it is. Now we have been forced to work overtime to make ends meet. They have taken away our health care benefits. They say everybody else is doing it, but that means they are pushing us backwards.”

Making matters worse for its members, the CWA signed a memorandum of understanding with Verizon on September 19, 2012, agreeing to the company’s request that picketers in any future strike be subjected to termination for numerous actions on the picket line.

Another Verizon worker at the rally, who wished to remain anonymous, said members of the CWA Local 1101 executive board have been quietly saying the company plans to demand major concessions, including freezing and eliminating the existing pension plan, work rule changes and ending job security provisions in the current contract when talks begin in late spring 2015.

“The company has not yet made any proposals with respect to renewing the contract,” the worker said. “So how can members of the 1101 bureaucracy be saying the company plans to freeze pensions? They have one purpose in spreading such information: they are laying the groundwork for further betrayals at the bargaining table. They are getting the ranks accustomed to the idea the company is seeking to freeze pensions and initiating more unfavorable work rules. Verizon has already begun forcing many workers to new locations.”

Thomas Feaggins is a central office technician. He explained, “Right now I have been forced to transfer

because of an arbitrary decision to transfer a whole department. The company decided to take almost the whole building and move them out of Manhattan to another borough. It was a violation of the contract to move but they were moved to Brooklyn. When this happened I ended up being forced to transfer out of headquarters here on 42nd Street. I live in Waterbury, Connecticut. My commute used to be about an hour and 45 minutes. Now I work in the Flatbush extension, and it takes me 3 to 3 ½ hours to get home.

“We came back in good faith after the last strike, and this is what Verizon does. They are trying to force people onto fiber [cables], and they are trying to run workers into the ground.”

Another worker at the rally said, “The leadership at CWA is primarily concerned with one thing: dues units.” “Dues units,” he explained, is the contemptuous name used by union officials for dues paying rank and file workers.



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