

Verizon workers rally in New York, authorize strike action

A WSWS reporting team
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Verizon's wireline workers across nine states voted to approve strike action a week ahead of the August 1 contract deadline. Communications Workers of America (CWA) and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) leadership announced the 86 percent strike authorization vote during a rally Saturday in lower Manhattan.

The rally was used by the unions to let off steam and to parade a number of Democrats, including US Senator Charles Schumer, a shill of Wall Street, before workers, claiming they are "friends of labor." The promotion of the Obama administration and the Democrats—who have overseen a relentless attack on the jobs, health care and pensions of workers—only underscores the fact that the CWA and the IBEW are preparing another betrayal of the working class.

Workers from throughout the northeast, numbering in the low thousands, assembled in New York to denounce the attacks on pension benefits, health care and job security by the country's second largest telecom giant. "They want to take our pensions away," Christa Clifford, a FiOS consultant from Pittsburgh told the WSWS. "All they want us to do is give back when they are making billions in profits. And we are the ones who make all their money."

Bill King, a Verizon worker from Rockland County, New York with 25 years on the job explained, "Verizon wants to eliminate layoff letters, so they can just fire people whenever they want. They want to be able to contract out laying cable lines and call centers." Several workers pointed to the recent experience in Pittsburgh, where Verizon laid off more than 40 technicians as a foreshadowing of Verizon's intentions under the next contract.

"There is an 'us vs. them' mentality with management," Alicia Davis, a Customer Service Sales

Consultant, said. "Right now if the company gives you overtime you have to work it, and with the new contract they are trying to push overtime from being thirty-seven and a half hours to forty hours. Verizon is also trying to double our medical costs. I'm a single mother with two kids and doubling medical costs is not something I can easily handle."

Workers spoke of sustained and escalating harassment by management as the company tries to squeeze them for ever-greater productivity. Andy Gutierrez, a field technician, said, "We're harassed by management every day. They say we're never doing enough. We get suspended without pay for trumped up reasons, for example, if we're idling in our trucks too long or not productive enough. It's getting worse."

A customer service worker call center worker from Pittsburgh who wished to remain unnamed for fear of retribution explained, "The working conditions are terrible. They treat us like little kids. They time us every time we go to the bathroom. If you spend 12 minutes in the bathroom, they ask you what you are doing there for so long.

"When they start messing with you, they never stop. They try to make you quit so this way the company doesn't have to pay you a pension. You can lose your job for just saying the wrong thing."

The union has been complicit in management's attacks. At a recent CWA Local 1101 membership meeting union officials handed out copies of the company's work rules and told workers not criticize the company on social media.

The organization of the rally itself reflected the union officialdom's contempt for workers. The atmosphere was shaped to resemble a street fair, with beach balls tossed into the crowd from the platform and pop music blaring from speakers in order to prevent any serious

discussion among workers over the battle they face. Union officials took the stage voicing faux outrage mixed with self-congratulatory statements and meaningless platitudes followed by rehearsed chanting.

The only reasonable explanation for the location of the rally was to promote a sense of isolation. The union chose a site behind the old headquarters of Verizon, surrounded by financial services office buildings closed on the weekend. The Verizon building maintains only a minimal number of active offices and equipment, while the operation headquarters and executive offices have long since relocated. It's hard to imagine a location anywhere in Manhattan where fewer people would be inconvenienced by or even take notice of a rally.

Despite weeks of appeals by the CWA executives for members to attend, turnout by the rank and file to the rally was relatively low. By nearly every estimate there was a fraction of the 10,000 members the CWA had anticipated. Noticeably absent were younger workers who are no doubt hostile to the union for accepting a two-tiered wage system in 2003, which stripped workers hired after that year of pensions, health care and job security benefits. CWA has also largely been unable to organize younger workers in Verizon's new lines of business.

For many of those who were in attendance, the sting of the CWA's betrayal of the workers 2011 strike was still fresh in their minds. One worker identifying himself only as H.K. told the WSWS, "they made us look like fools sending us back to work without a contract last time. A lot of us were skeptical about coming here today. They're going to have us do this rally—for what?"

Rich Sibley, who works as a splicer and unit president in Philadelphia, said, "I thought it was not the right move in the last strike when we went back to work after two weeks on strike with no contract. Workers were more engaged at that time than ever before. There was a hurricane coming up the East Coast. We had the edge, and we lost it when we went back to work based on the company lies. I felt we should have kept our foot on their throat."

In addition to Senator Schumer, a number of local Democrats are also appeared. They called on Verizon to build out its FiOS fiber optic cable service in more areas of the city, parroting the line put forward by CWA and IBEW as a job saving measure. Verizon

refuses to build its advanced television and high speed Internet network in areas the company deems unprofitable. The empty protests of a section of Democrats, a party committed above all to the defense of the profit system, is aimed at diverting any genuine struggle behind self-defeating appeals to the corporations.

The WSWS discussed these political issues with workers at the rally. John Allen, from Philadelphia with 20 years experience at Verizon, said, "I don't know what to think politically. Obama said he would stand with unions on the picket line, but now his health care initiative is being rammed down our throats. They are all liars."

Bill King remarked, "The Republicans and Democrats side with the people who support them, and those are the lobbyists. Every time our fight gets harder since Verizon keeps paying lobbyists, so the politicians are always on their side."

Asked about how the extreme levels of inequality relate to the struggle at Verizon, Andy Gutierrez commented, "The ratio of CEO pay to workers' pay keeps growing. This is going on at all the major corporations. It's a slap in the face. As long as we give in they will keep pushing for more. It's got to stop. The union is always trying to find some happy medium, which doesn't seem to be working lately."



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