

US telecom unions order Verizon workers to stay on job as contract expires

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The Communication Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) have ordered workers to stay on the job at Verizon despite the expiration of their labor agreements on August 1. The contracts cover 39,000 of Verizon's wireline workers in 13 eastern US states from Virginia to Maine.

In a series of emails, phone calls and a teleconference over the weekend, the CWA and IBEW warned members not to walk out, ignoring the mandate by workers who voted 86 percent in favor of strike action in the weeks leading up to the contract deadline.

In the statements posted on their web site CWA wrote, "after considering all of our options, your leadership has decided not to go on strike at midnight tonight, even though we have not yet reached a contract agreement."

After acknowledging that Verizon had not withdrawn any of its demands for sweeping concessions, the union sought to justify its treachery by presenting its decision not to strike as a masterstroke of tactical ingenuity.

"But we are not going to let our anger allow us to walk into a trap. It's quite possible that Verizon is trying to provoke us into a long strike in order to try to break us. They have spent tens of millions of dollars preparing for a strike, training managers, hiring scabs and contractors, advertising against us on TV and radio. So your leadership has decided that if and when we strike, it will be on our terms, on our timing."

Verizon is demanding cuts in pensions and health care for active employees and reduction in health benefits for 44,000 retirees and dependents. The company also wants to eliminate any restrictions on outsourcing jobs and forcing workers to move to any location in 13 states. It also wants to expand the use of contractors and temporary workers.

The unions are downplaying the implications of not having a contract, claiming Verizon must follow the terms of the previous contract. This is a lie. Verizon will expand its use of non-union labor and likely impose health care cuts. Most notably, workers will lose the right to grievance arbitration, which means Verizon can discipline workers up to and including firing them and they will have no recourse.

This arrangement gives Verizon the incentive to victimize workers and violate the contract since resolving any grievances can be used as bargaining chips in exchange for further union concessions. In other words, both the company and the union will hold potential disciplinary action over the heads of workers in order to soften them up to accept another sellout agreement.

Workers cannot believe claims by CWA officials that they will call strikes to settle grievances. In 2012, the CWA signed a special letter with Verizon granting the company the right to fire workers on any future strike for supposed picket line violations, including the alleged use of "hate speech" against strikebreakers and any action that "impedes or interferes with the operation of a company vehicle." Basic practices such as calling management "scab," or picketing in front of a garage would be grounds for firing workers.

So closely are Verizon and the unions working together to discipline workers, that on the Thursday before the contract expired, Verizon sent an email to all its employees warning them they would be fired for any violations during a strike.

The CWA and IBEW have no intention of mobilizing the kind of movement of the working class that would be required to defeat Verizon. Far from being adversaries of the company, the unions are working with Verizon to impose its demands in exchange for

“organizing” a section of Verizon wireless workers. This would do nothing to improve the wages and conditions of these exploited workers but it would increase the flow of dues income to the union apparatus.

Even as they are forced to continue working without a contract, Verizon workers will still have to pay dues for the privilege of being “represented” by the CWA and IBEW. A 2012 ruling from the Obama administration requires that companies where workers are working without a contract continue deducting dues from the members and pass that money on to the unions.

A host of pseudo-left groups are assisting the CWA and the IBEW in this betrayal.

CWA local 1101, which represents the greatest number of Verizon workers in New York, sent an email to its members, and posted on their web site, a 2013 article by Robert Schwartz of Labor Notes titled, “Working without a contract: A strategy whose time has come?” While the title may end with a question mark, the article is unambiguous about its enthusiastic support for blocking any strike action by workers.

This is only the latest in a long line of betrayals of telecommunication workers. In 2011 the CWA and IBEW called off a strike after just two weeks, without Verizon agreeing to a contract. Negotiations dragged on for 16 months as the union agreed to concessions and job cuts. Despite having what the union calls a no layoff clause, Verizon has cut over 5,000 workers since 2012. Overall, the unions have overseen the destruction of over 300,000 telecommunications jobs in the past 30 years while the companies made enormous profits and expanded into wireless, Internet and cable TV service.

The Socialist Equality Party urges workers to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the CWA and IBEW by electing action committees, democratically controlled by the rank-and-file workers.



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