

Unions keep Verizon and AT&T workers on job without contracts

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A month after contracts expired for 39,000 telecom workers at Verizon and more than three weeks after they expired for 28,000 workers at AT&T, the Communication Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) have refused to call a strike. The unions are continuing to order their members to work without a contract, despite the draconian concessions being demanded by both companies.

AT&T and Verizon want cuts to pensions and health care, changes to work rules and the expanded use of contractors and temporary workers. Both companies have destroyed tens of thousands of jobs while pushing for greater productivity.

Workers report that Verizon has begun a practice of victimizing workers. Management personnel and others brought in by the company to work in the event of a strike have followed workers around, photographing and writing them up for the smallest of infractions. The company has been imposing drastic disciplinary measures including dismissal of some workers.

When instructing their members not to strike and to continue working without a contract, the CWA and IBEW claimed that the company was required to follow the provisions of the existing contract. In fact, this is not true: in particular workers lost the right to arbitrate grievances that are denied by the company at the third level. This means the company can arbitrarily discipline workers, up to and including their dismissal without workers having recourse.

The CWA has stated that all such cases will be part of any future settlement and that they have the option of calling a strike to protest disciplined cases. In reality, the union has no intention of calling a strike. This only encourages the company to arbitrarily discipline workers who will be used as hostages in exchange for concessions.

There is, however, one aspect of the union contract that

does not change. A 2012 decision by Obama's National Labor Relations Board orders companies to continue withholding union dues from employees' paychecks and passing those funds along to unions.

In other words, the income stream of the union officials will continue unabated. This was a deliberate decision of the Obama administration, which wants to ensure that the union bureaucracy is well rewarded for their continuing efforts in curtailing the growing anger of workers over mounting inequality.

More than 2,200 steelworkers at Pittsburgh-based Allegheny Technologies Inc. have been locked out since August 15 and are being replaced with management and non-union employees. The United Steelworkers (USW), which "represents" the workers, had also ordered their members to continue working without a contract after their contract expired June 30. This continued even as the company brought in increased security and began training replacements.

The USW has just signed a "continue to work settlement" with ArcelorMittal and US Steel to block a strike by 30,000 steelworkers. This will allow the steel giants to hire strikebreakers and continue to stockpile inventory in preparation for a long lockout or strike.

The Verizon contracts expired August 1 and cover workers in 13 northeastern states from Virginia to Maine, and also Washington, DC. The workers are members of the Communication Workers of America and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. The AT&T contract expired August 6 and covers CWA workers in nine southeastern states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee.

The unions have been organizing protests, including "practice" pickets during lunch hour, and have told their members not to volunteer for any overtime. Management has responded by forcing the workers to work overtime

and boasts that there is no backlog of service requests or troubles and that business is proceeding normally.

Both the union and the company admit that they are still far apart with no settlement in site. The union websites are only now posting updates about a week apart and state that the company has not budged on a single concession demand. In fact, the negotiations have broken down in all but name, as Verizon sees no reason to move at all.

A Verizon worker reported that he had been told that the union is offering to take over the management of the health care benefits for the company. The union is claiming that they can do a better job at controlling costs. If this turns out to be true and the company goes along with it, the CWA would join a number of other unions, particularly the United Auto Workers, who have taken over health care and other benefits programs.

Firstly, the CWA would be set to make enormous sums on the management fees and for arranging contracts with various health insurers. Second, the CWA will directly profit from imposing cuts and the rationing of health care to its members for the company.

Another aspect driving both the company and the union to cut health care costs is the imposition of the so-called “Cadillac Tax” in 2018. Passed as part of Obama’s Affordable Care Act, the tax is imposed on companies that provide workers with what the government considers too costly benefits. Its purpose is to force companies to cut health care benefits.

In keeping the workers at work and imposing one concessions contract after another, the CWA and IBEW leadership is seeking to prove their usefulness as a second layer of management. Allied with the Obama administration, the unions are also doing everything they can to prevent a unified struggle of telecom workers with hundreds of thousands of autoworkers, steelworkers, teachers and US Postal Service workers whose contracts have already expired or are about to expire.



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