

Unions at telecom giant Verizon announce April 13 strike deadline

Maria Kovalenko
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Having forced their members to work without a contract for eight months the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) announced Monday that they will call a strike April 13 at 6am if no agreement is reached. If the walkout takes place it would involve some 40,000 workers on the East Coast of the US, from Massachusetts to Virginia.

Verizon is among the largest and most profitable corporations in the US and one of the largest telecom firms in the world. The main issues are pensions, shifting of health care cost to workers, job security and Verizon's demand to be able to transfer workers across a wide geographic area for extended time periods with little or no advance notice.

"Unless this company has a major change in direction and gets back on track, we will be on strike on Wednesday at 6am," CWA President Chris Shelton said in a Monday afternoon conference call. "A strike is a last resort but Verizon has forced us there."

Facing the disgust and anger of rank-and-file workers, CWA officials postured as opponents of corporate management, even though they have spent decades boosting corporate profits through union-backed cost-cutting.

"We've worked hard in negotiations to find common ground, but working people at Verizon and across the country have had enough of the corporate greed that is destroying our families and our economy," said CWA District 1 Vice President Dennis Trainor. "Verizon is pulling down \$1.8 billion a month in profits right now, and they're trying to destroy the good family-supporting jobs of the workers who've made those profits."

For workers health care has long been one of the most contentious matters. In 1989, workers conducted a bitter four-month strike against what was then NYNEX to maintain health care benefits. During the struggle one striker, Gerry Horgan, was run down by a strikebreaker and killed on the picket line.

By 2011, the CWA abandoned any resistance to health care concessions. Striking workers were fully prepared and willing to dig in and fight the company but by the second

week of the walkout, the CWA bureaucracy sent the workers back to work with no contract and then later imposed a deal full of concessions, including major givebacks on health care.

With Obama's so-called Cadillac Tax provision on supposedly over-generous health benefits set to go into effect during the anticipated span of the next contract Verizon has doubled down on its efforts to shift even greater health care cost to workers.

Verizon is demanding to cap pensions for older workers. In 2003, the CWA signed away pension and job security rights for new hires. The result is that CWA now has an aging membership with few younger members.

As part of the back-to-work agreement after the betrayal of the 2011-12 strike, the CWA signed away the rights of workers on picket line. Shortly after the press conference announcing the strike deadline, Verizon management sent an email to its entire East Coast workforce reminding workers that the union agreed that workers could be fired for "hate speech," mass picketing or impeding the operation of company vehicles. "It is important," the Verizon managers ominously warned, "that everyone understand what conduct the Company and the unions agreed would constitute just cause for discharge."

While Verizon workers have expressed a strong determination to fight the corporate giant, due to the CWA's long record of betrayals many know the CWA is opposed to any real fight that would disrupt relations with its corporate "partners."

Workers at Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn said they saw no point in participating in a publicity stunt by the union, which would have them strike for a few days or perhaps weeks only to go back to work worse off than before. "They'll put us on the street, then when it's time for [CWA President Chris] Shelton to start paying us from the union defense fund he'll send us back in a hurry with nothing to show for our efforts."

With the acquiescence of the CWA, Verizon has been attacking and harassing workers on the job to extract more

productivity from them. Technology, including GPS, is being widely used to track workers. Workers whose daily route sheet show a discrepancy of even a few minutes from the data recorded by automated dispatch processes are subjected to victimization, suspensions and firing. Workers have informed the *World Socialist Web Site* that management has a quota to suspend so many technicians each week.

While workers face provocations without any contractual protections, the CWA continues to collect dues and its officials have told members to give the company “a fair days work for a fair days pay.” A number of workers have indicated they would rather be on strike than face 30-day suspensions and other punishments. Many of the new work rules are so contradictory that it is impossible not to be disciplined if targeted by management.

The drive to squeeze ever-greater profit from workers is being driven by the dictates of finance capital. Every consideration by top management is predicated on how to increase profit each quarter over the previous quarter. This is the constant theme the company broadcasts in its internal Internet communications with workers.

The “needs of the business” are, in fact, those demanded by Wall Street. The CWA’s role has been to facilitate the transfer of wealth from the workers to wealthy shareholders. The CWA functions as a tool of the company to enforce labor discipline and increase the exploitation of workers. For their efforts the union bureaucrats have secured a comfortable and privileged lifestyle for themselves. Shelton made \$163,425 in 2015, according to the US Labor Department, before being kicked upstairs to union president. Trainor made \$160,134.

In an effort to give itself a “left” cover, the CWA has endorsed Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders for the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party. The self-styled “democratic socialist” has won popular support for his denunciations of the “billionaire class,” while seeking to boost illusions in the capitalist Democratic Party. Sanders has also promoted economic nationalism, making him a darling of large sections of the trade union bureaucracy, which have long used attacks on workers in other countries to conceal their collaboration with the corporations.

Rejecting any struggle to unite telecom workers around the world, the CWA has raised as a central demand that Verizon stop “off-shoring jobs” to Mexico, the Philippines and other locations.

The CWA chose as its deadline the same day the Sanders campaign is holding what the union web site has labeled a “massive rally” in New York City’s Washington Square park, not far from Verizon Headquarters. The explicit aim here is to boost illusions that the Democrats will pressure

Verizon to expand the rollout of its FiOS optic fiber cable system, which it has generally limited to higher-income areas. The CWA says Verizon has abandoned the further expansion of FiOS and is neglecting its existing copper network in order to expand its largely non-union wireless system.

While backing Sanders, the CWA has also donated funds to Hillary Clinton in the current election cycle. According to Open Secrets, since 1990 the CWA has contributed a total of \$43.8 million to Democrats, the principle party of finance capital.

The CWA has no intention of waging any struggle against the telecom corporations, Wall Street and the big business parties that stand behind them. That is why workers should elect rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, in every workplace to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the pro-company unions.

The telecom giant is a powerful enemy but the allies of Verizon workers are more powerful. Rather than appealing to the Democrats, Verizon workers should appeal to the tens of millions of workers—in the public sector, manufacturing, retail, airline and trucking, and other industries; students, young people, immigrant workers and the unemployed—to carry out a powerful counter-offensive against the attack on jobs, wages and pensions.

This must be connected to a political struggle to mobilize the independent strength of the working class against both big business parties and the capitalist system, which is the source of poverty, inequality and war. The working class must overthrow the economic and political dictatorship of the corporate and financial elite and carry out a genuine socialist transformation, including the nationalization of the telecom monopolies and the big banks under the democratic control and collective ownership of the working class.



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