

Thirty-nine thousand Verizon workers on strike in US

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After more than eight months of working without a contract, 39,000 Verizon workers walked off their jobs Tuesday morning at hundreds of locations on the East Coast of the United States. The workers are opposing stagnating wages, attacks on pensions, increased health care costs, outsourcing and the telecom giant's demand for license to transfer workers across wide geographic areas for extended time periods with little or no advance notice.

Thousands of workers set up picket lines in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, DC and other cities from Massachusetts to Virginia. The opposition of workers to the demands of the company, which makes \$1.8 billion in profits each month, is part of a growing mood of resistance among workers in the US and internationally.

"Working people have to fight for a better living today," Joseph, a tech worker with nearly five years in the Washington, DC area, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "It's very difficult to live in this area when the monthly rent at the average studio apartment is \$2,000." Joseph said he had seen a number of workers laid off in recent times, and that company higher ups would frequently suspend workers as a way of demonstrating their loyalty to the company.

"I love to help customers, to see the look on someone's face when I tell them their cable is back on. It warms my heart," Joseph said. He added, "If you'd have told me when I was younger that I'd one day be out here on a strike against a company as big as Verizon, I'd have laughed, but here I am."

While workers are determined to fight, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) are opposed to any struggle that would disrupt their long-standing corporatist relations with the company. Both unions have spent decades collaborating in imposing cost-

cutting measures and have already offered major contract concessions.

Most importantly, the unions are closely allied with the Obama administration, which has overseen the development of a low-wage economy in the US and encouraged corporations to shift health care and pension costs onto the backs of workers. The AFL-CIO and other unions are determined to wrap up the Verizon strike as soon as possible to prevent it from becoming a catalyst for a far broader mobilization of the working class against stagnating wages on the one hand and record corporate profits and stock prices on the other.

The actions of the union bureaucracy have been closely coordinated with the campaign of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders for the Democratic presidential nomination. The CWA has endorsed Sanders, who faces a close contest in the April 19 New York primary against former secretary of state Hillary Clinton.

A strike schedule emailed by CWA Local 1101 in New York City, the largest Verizon union local, told its 3,500 members to mobilize "in big numbers" in Manhattan for the "strike kickoff." It then instructed strikers to arrive early for the "massive Rally with Bernie Sanders at Washington Square Park."

On Monday, Sanders visited a CWA office in upstate New York and later told a rally at the University of Buffalo, "The workers at Verizon are going on strike because Verizon, reflecting what corporate America is doing all over this country, is asking them to pay more for their health care and cutting other benefits. Verizon, a highly profitable corporation, is outsourcing call service jobs to the Philippines and not investing in inner cities in places like Buffalo, New York."

Union President Chris Shelton has endorsed Sanders, who has gained widespread support for his denunciations of Wall Street and the "billionaire class," to give the CWA a left cover as it works out another sellout deal

behind the backs of Verizon workers. The Democratic candidate, for his part, sees the strike as an opportunity to boost his credentials among workers.

Sanders has sought to conceal the class chasm between rank-and-file workers and the union bureaucracy, which has betrayed struggle after struggle. At the same time, he has promoted economic nationalism, which has long been used by the unions to divide American workers from their class brothers and sisters internationally and impose job cuts and wage reductions in the name of making the corporations “more competitive.”

The CWA and Sanders are railing against Verizon’s efforts to impose greater out-of-pocket health care costs on workers while concealing the fact that Obama’s “Cadillac Tax” on supposedly overly generous health benefits is designed to force workers into sub-standard medical plans while paying increased out-of-pocket costs. Verizon is only the latest US corporation—following the auto and steel industries—to shift onto the backs of workers the 40 percent excise tax on “high-cost benefits” that goes into effect on January 1, 2018 as part of Obama’s misnamed Affordable Care Act.

Strikers include installers, customer service employees, repairmen and other workers who service Verizon’s copper-based landline system and its Fios fiber optic cable system. The corporation has increasingly phased out jobs at its less profitable copper-based landline division while expanding its lucrative wireless division with largely non-union workers.

The unions, which have repeatedly offered deep concessions to extend their franchise, i.e., to collect union dues in the wireless sector, have at the same time boosted illusion that the Democrats will pressure Verizon to expand its fiber optic system into lower-income areas and hire more workers.

In reality, the Democrats have been in the forefront of deregulating the industry and strengthening the monopoly of a handful of telecom giants, including Verizon. Then-Democratic President Bill Clinton sold the bi-partisan Telecommunications Act of 1996 as measure that would produce more competition, more diversity of viewpoints, lower prices for consumers and more jobs. Instead, the industry has been consolidated, eliminating more than a half-million jobs, and prices have soared.

Verizon workers have a long record of struggle, which has repeatedly put them into a direct conflict with the CWA and other unions. In 1989, workers waged a four-month strike to defend their health care benefits against what was then NYNEX. During the bitter fight, one

striker, Gerry Horgan, was run down by a strikebreaker and killed on the picket line.

In 2011, Verizon workers struck again, but the CWA shut down the fight in the second week, sending workers back to work with no contract. The union later imposed a concessions-laden deal that included major givebacks on health care. As part of the back-to-work agreement, the CWA allowed the company to attack workers’ rights, granting the company’s demands that workers be subject to discharge for “hate speech” and “impeding” company vehicles during a strike.

Earlier this week, Verizon sent an ominous email to all employees, saying, “It is important that everyone understand what conduct the Company and the unions agreed would constitute just cause for discharge.”

Workers can place no confidence in the CWA, IBEW or other unions, which have no intention of waging the required struggle against the telecom corporations, Wall Street, and the big business parties that stand behind them. Instead, workers at every workplace should elect rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by the workers themselves, to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the pro-company unions.

Rather than appealing to the Democrats, Verizon workers should appeal to the tens of millions of workers—in the public sector, manufacturing, retail, airline, trucking and other industries—as well as students, young people and the unemployed to carry out a powerful counteroffensive against the attack on jobs, wages and pensions.

Workers should reject the economic nationalism that aids the efforts of the global corporations to weaken and divide the working class, and fight to unite telecom workers in Mexico, the Philippines and around the world.

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.



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