

The political issues in the Verizon strike

Barry Grey
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The strike by 39,000 workers against the US telecom giant Verizon is a powerful expression of the growing mood of militancy and opposition to the corporate and political establishment among workers throughout the United States and internationally. It coincides with a wildcat strike by air traffic controllers in Belgium and mass protests by workers and youth in France against austerity and attacks on job security, as well as growing strikes and working class protests across Asia, Africa and Latin America.

It follows the strike by US oil refinery workers last year and the massive resistance of auto workers to the sellout contracts imposed by the United Auto Workers at General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler, which included the first rejection by the rank-and-file of a Big Three auto contract in more than 30 years.

After working for eight months without a contract, the installers, customer service employees, technicians and repairmen in Verizon's landline division are determined to oppose the company's demands for new concessions that will further slash jobs, reduce pension and health benefits, and enable the company to transfer workers to distant locations for months at a time. The company, which is taking in \$1.8 billion in profits per month, is demanding a cap on pensions for older workers, further shifting of health costs to employees and more expansive outsourcing of jobs.

Verizon is prepared to proceed ruthlessly against the strikers. On the eve of the walkout, the president of the company's wireline network division noted that management had trained thousands of non-union workers as strikebreakers and moved staff to other locations to maintain operations. "Let's make it clear," he said, "we are ready for a strike."

Earlier this week, Verizon sent a threatening 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." In

the four-month strike in 1989 against Verizon's predecessor company, NYNEX, striker Gerry Horgan was killed when a scab truck driver ran him over on the picket line.

Workers can place no confidence in the Communications Workers of America (CWA) or the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) to counter the attacks of management and carry through a serious struggle. They have collaborated with the company for decades in imposing job cuts and concessions, including the establishment of a two-tier system in which newly hired workers receive no pension and have no job protection. Since their betrayal of the strike in 2000, in which the unions sent the majority of strikers back to work while the walkout was still in progress, the workforce has been slashed by 40 percent.

In 2011, the unions called off a strike after only two weeks without obtaining a new contract or any agreement by the company to withdraw its \$1 billion in concessions demands or any amnesty for workers victimized by management in the course of the walkout. More than a year later, they pushed through a sellout deal that imposed most of the take-aways demanded by Verizon.

The Obama administration's Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS) intervened to help impose that pro-company agreement on the workers. On Tuesday, Verizon said the FMCS had offered to intervene once again.

The preoccupation of the unions is to gain access to the company's expanding wireless division, which is largely non-union, and pressure the company to expand its optic fiber cable operations. To obtain a new source of dues revenue, they are prepared to offer up the wages, benefits and working conditions of their members. A press release posted on the CWA web site Tuesday makes no mention of the company's demands

for new concessions on pensions and health benefits.

The unions combine corporatist collusion with the company and the promotion of economic nationalism and protectionism. The CWA and IBEW focus their anti-Verizon rhetoric on its outsourcing of jobs to the Philippines, Mexico and other low-wage countries. This serves to divide the working class and pit Verizon workers against their class brothers and sisters in other countries. At the same time, it provides the framework for the imposition of ever more draconian concessions, carried out in the name of boosting corporate competitiveness. The logic of this reactionary policy is a fratricidal race to the bottom between different sections of workers.

Verizon is a massive corporation that operates on a global scale. Its Enterprise Solutions division supports services in 75 countries and has a global IP network that reaches more than 150 countries. The notion that American workers can fight the company in isolation from and in opposition to workers in other countries is utterly bankrupt.

Instead of turning to the Obama administration and Democratic politicians such as Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, as pushed by the unions, Verizon workers need to turn out broadly to the working class and youth across the US and to their fellow workers in Mexico, the Philippines and internationally.

The unions enforce the subordination of the workers to the profiteering and cost-cutting of the corporations through their political alliance with the big business Democratic Party. The CWA, which has endorsed the campaign of Sanders for the Democratic presidential nomination, timed the strike for the run-up to next Tuesday's critical New York primary. It coordinated the walkout with the Sanders campaign, allowing the self-described "democratic socialist" to make an appearance on a Brooklyn picket line and promote his anti-Wall Street credentials. The CWA further instructed picketers to attend a Sanders rally Wednesday night in Manhattan.

In the Democratic primary campaign, Sanders is the most vociferous advocate of protectionist and trade war policies, echoing the America-first nationalism of the trade union bureaucracy. The Verizon unions are seeking, by means of his campaign, to corral the seething anger and militancy of the workers back into the dead-end of the Democratic Party, which has

worked, no less than the Republicans, to destroy the living standards of US workers and further enrich the corporate and financial elite.

While they make noises in opposition to the company's demand for further cutbacks in workers' health benefits, the unions say nothing about the fact that the basis for Verizon's demands is the need to conform to the 40 percent "Cadillac tax" on supposedly overly generous health insurance plans included in Obama's misnamed Affordable Care Act.

Hillary Clinton's statement of support for the Verizon strikers on Tuesday is completely cynical and hypocritical. She and her husband have taken tens of millions in bribes from Wall Street and the corporate elite since leaving the White House, parlaying their years in power to gain access to the financial aristocracy. While in power, moreover, Bill Clinton signed the Telecommunications Act of 1996 that paved the way for the wave of mergers and consolidations out of which Verizon emerged as a telecom colossus.

Verizon workers need to reject the policies of the unions and break their organizational control of the strike. They should elect rank-and-file committees of action to organize a turn out to broader sections of the working class and youth and to telecom workers internationally.

This must be combined with a new political strategy—the building of an independent political movement of the working class armed with a genuine socialist program, including the nationalization of the banks and major corporations and their transformation into public utilities under the democratic control of working people.



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