

Verizon workers speak on issues in strike

Our reporters
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Some 39,000 Verizon workers on the US East Coast are in their second day of strike after working more than 10 months without a contract. The workers are battling takeaway demands including attacks on pensions, increased health care costs, outsourcing and demands by management to be able to transfer workers across wide geographic areas with little or no advance notice.

The walkout, the largest in years, is an expression of the pent up anger of workers all across the United States after years of declining or stagnating wages and eroding living standards in the face of massive corporate profits. Telecommunications giant Verizon rakes in some \$1.8 billion in profit a month from its operations. The company's stock has been one the hottest in the market this year, up 12 percent.

The company said it would use nonunion personnel to maintain its operations during the walkout. On the first day of the strike a vehicle crossing the picket line struck a striking worker in Gaithersburg, Maryland. The picket was reportedly hospitalized with non-life threatening injuries.

In the face of the determination of Verizon workers to fight, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) is attempting to channel workers' anger behind the Democratic Party. On Wednesday, Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders attended a mid-day rally called by the CWA in Brooklyn, New York. The union, which has officially endorsed Sanders, then told workers to attend a rally in lower Manhattan for the Democratic candidate.

While professing support for striking workers, the Vermont Senator is a steadfast defender of the policies of the Obama administration, which has overseen the development of a low-wage economy in the United States and is moving to shift health care costs onto the backs of workers through the Affordable Care Act.

Sanders promoted the economic nationalism of the unions, claiming that Verizon's outsourcing of telecom jobs to Mexico, the Philippines and other countries is the essential problem and not the global capitalist system that exploits workers of all countries.

Hillary Clinton also feigned support for the strikers. Her husband's 1996 Telecommunications Act deregulated the industry, paving the way for a series of mergers that wiped out a half-million telecom jobs.

In advance of the strike, Verizon said it was open to the intervention of the Obama administration through the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service.

Verizon workers struck for two weeks in 2011 before the CWA ordered them back without a contract. The CWA later signed a concession-ridden deal that included major cuts to health care.

World Socialist Web Site reporting teams spoke to striking workers on picket lines in several states Wednesday. They received a warm welcome from strikers who expressed a strong determination to fight after years of attacks on their living standards and working conditions.

New York

On the morning the strike was called, about 30 outside technicians based at a midtown Manhattan garage picketed in front of the Verizon store on busy 42nd Street. After a few hours police came to set up a fence to contain their line but the strikers were leaving anyway to join in a rally at another location.

Gabe Castillo, a technician, explained that he felt job security was a key issue. "They are trying to contract out our work. They want to send our jobs overseas, especially like call center customer service, which do some remote fixes that can be carried out over the phone.

"In a country as rich as ours, we should be able to support our families. Verizon is making billions a year. So how are they telling us there is no money? And what about the tax breaks they get? Is it fair that the executives are paid \$18-20 million a year? They should cut costs there."

Dino Fratto, an outside technician with 21 years service who works out of 36th Street in Manhattan told the WSW, "The strike is about being treated fairly and sharing the wealth of the company. They have had record profits of \$1.8 billion per month for the last couple of months, but we aren't being treated fairly.

"They want to be able to transfer people anywhere they want for two months anytime they want. We live in New York and work in New York. They want to be able to send us to Virginia for two months and totally disrupt our families. They want to make Sunday into a regular workday. They want to cap our pensions at 30 years. Some of us already have 30 years service, and we would be forced to retire or work with no pension increase while the company gets richer.

"I think the company pushed us to the point of this strike. We were thinking the company would bargain fairly, but we were insulted. This goes back to 2011 when we struck for two weeks, and then went back because the union said the company would bargain fairly. It didn't. The company is the one being greedy. Not us."

John, another tech from 36th Street, explained, "The strike was a

long time coming. I'm not sure we will get what we really want. I just hope we get something we can deal with.

"I know many companies are having economic problems, but Verizon is making record profits. We are not asking for too much. We want job security. We saw the 9,000 layoffs of management and wireless people in November, and they are trying to hit people who came in before 2003.

"I think this just reached a boiling point, and the strike had to happen. The company was disciplining workers, suspending and firing us, they have kept adding onto the amount of equipment we have to carry."

Pittsburgh

Several hundred workers rallied outside the Verizon building in downtown Pittsburgh early Wednesday morning.

Kate McTighe is retired after working for Verizon for 43 years. She came to the rally to show her support. "We have been trying to negotiate a contract since last June. The company wants us paying more for health care, they want to be able to shut call centers and move jobs anywhere.

"In 2012 we gave a lot of concessions, the company said they were doing bad and we agreed to help. But now the company is making billions. They are making huge profits and it is time they share it with the workers."

Michael with five years said, "They want to be able to close down the call centers and move them out of state. All of these people rely upon these jobs to be able to take care of themselves and their families.

"This is about corporate greed, they don't care about the people that keep everything working, they just want more money for themselves."

Jackie Barnard, with 16 years said, "We are here because [Verizon CEO] Lowell McAdams is being selfish. All we want to do is serve our customers and they are doing everything they can to stop us.

"Job security, pension benefits and health care—that is why we are here. The company wants to cut back and make us pay more for our health care. We want to work for our customers, help our customers and the company is doing everything they can to prevent us from doing that. We want people to have good service, copper or fiber."

Jackie's friend Marcia Beate, with 21 years added, "Verizon wants to close down all the call centers and move them out of state. They want to take away the jobs from good working people.

"They also want to force people to move. They want to take a technician and say they have to go to New York for three months. Or you got to go to Virginia for two months at a moment's notice. You will be away from your family and your location without any notice.

"The company wants to freeze our pensions after so many years. So you don't put anything more into it. What you have got is what you get. If you work for 10 more years you don't get any more

pension. Nothing is going to grow. They don't want to pay any more into it."

Ken Richards with 12 years service said, "We are standing up for our jobs. They are trying to outsource our jobs, the call centers and everything. They can now tell people that they can be transferred for 50 miles. They want to increase that to 100 miles and send you anywhere for two or three months.

"The main issue is job outsourcing. If it goes the way they want it to go, none of us will have jobs in a year. I am a technician. I can move around, but it is very hard to get a job with a good career path."

Norfolk, Virginia

A WWS reporter spoke with striking workers at the Verizon maintenance center in Norfolk, Virginia. Several dozen workers and supporters attended a rally organized by CWA Local 2201. Cars, trucks, ambulances and other vehicles honked their horns in support of the striking workers.

Carol, a maintenance administrator, explained that healthcare was an important aspect of the current contract dispute. "Verizon wants to increase our benefits contributions and health care costs. People really can't afford health insurance. This company should be able to provide health care and a retirement to the workers. We've already given cutbacks to the company. They're supposed to be adults and negotiate a fair deal with us."

Jeannie, who works in the engineering department, also expressed concern about health care. "We are facing higher deductibles and out-of-pocket expenses. These will hurt current workers, but they will also hurt retired workers drastically. I think retirees should be grandfathered into the old contract that they worked under. Verizon should not be able to take back what they promised them."

This reporter asked Jeannie if she was familiar with the slashing of retiree benefits for autoworkers represented by the United Auto Workers (UAW).

"They should not be allowed to do that, legally. The money that these corporations spend on lobbying should be spent on the employees. America is starting to look like a third world country, with no middle class, just poor and rich. Who will be able to buy things that the corporations make? The CEO of Verizon makes too much money, something like 200 percent more than his best paid subordinate."

In reference to CEO pay and rising social inequality, she added, "The whole system is broken by corporate greed. I am not greedy. I tell Verizon 'leave me alone and leave me with the contract I already have.'"



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