

“Not just for us, but for other workers too”

Verizon workers discuss political issues in strike

Our reporters
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More than 39,000 Verizon workers across the eastern coast of the United States are in the third day of their strike against the giant telecom’s demands to slash their health care and pension benefits and transfer workers across wide geographic areas with little or no advance notice.

The Communications Workers of America (CWA) called the strike Wednesday morning after forcing Verizon workers to labor without a contract for more than eight months, during which time many were subjected to arbitrary victimization. Many strikers expressed their concern that the CWA would repeat its betrayal of 2011, when it sent workers back to work during the second week of a strike without a contract. It then imposed a contract that cut health benefits and paved the way for further victimizations for supposed picket line “violations” in the event of another strike.

There is widespread sympathy for the striking workers because the issues they are fighting about confront tens of millions of industrial, service and public sector workers. Far from fighting to mobilize the strength of the working class against the corporate-government attack on jobs and living standards, the unions have done everything to isolate each section of workers.

The CWA, which has officially endorsed the Democratic Party presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders, has sought to emasculate the strike and use it as a means to boost illusions in the Democratic Party, which, no less than the Republicans, is the enemy of the working class. Sanders and Clinton have visited the picket lines to posture as supporters of the strike. The CWA organized a march across the Brooklyn Bridge and timed the event to correspond with the Democratic debate Thursday night at the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

The CWA sent workers to various stunts to promote the Democrats, including picketing McDonald’s restaurants in support of the \$15 minimum wage campaign. The CWA is also promoting the claim that the Democrats can force Verizon to expand its Fios fiber optic system, which it has generally limited to more profitable markets.

Clinton’s husband oversaw the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which facilitated the consolidation of the industry in the hands of monopolies like Verizon. She also accepted hundreds of thousands of dollars in speaking fees from Verizon itself. As for Sanders, the self-described “democratic socialist” is deliberately concealing the role of the CWA bureaucracy, which has repeatedly betrayed Verizon workers, while echoing the economic nationalism of the unions, which blame Mexican and Philippine workers for “taking US jobs.”

WSWS supporters distributed “The political issues in the Verizon Strike” and spoke with workers about their struggle.

In **New York City**, Rohan, a field tech splicer who works on the fiber optic and copper lines, told the WSWS, “We are striking to keep what we have. Verizon is trying to take away benefits we fought for and won. In

2011, we went back to work without the company’s concessions demands being taken off the table. We were forced to accept takeaways. I have a young family at home, and I don’t want to pay an arm and a leg for health care. I am young, but I want a pension.

“Maybe we should have gone out earlier, but at some point we had to do this. Workers are coming to a point where we just say we are tired of this.”

Mike, a customer service representative, said, “Since the Verizon strike in 2011 the social environment is different. The public is now interested in what we want. Americans are starting to recognize that we are losing jobs, everyone. Yesterday students from CUNY [the City University of New York] came out to support our picket lines.”

Orlando, a field technician, said, “The corporation has all the money. The unions are shrinking. It is really good to see all the people out here now. The union and company were negotiating for ten months. This contract would change my job security. I’d be without a job. I have fifteen years. I work hard. I earned this. We have to stick together and tell the company, ‘enough is enough.’”

Marching across the Brooklyn Bridge, Will said, “The key things are a permanent job, the same level of health care if not better, not letting them take away pensions. 2012 was the last time they offered pensions. They also don’t want to contribute to 401(k)’s [retirement accounts that are invested in stock markets]. This situation exists because of corporate greed to fatten their pockets. Even when the union negotiating team offered concessions, they said no.

“They want us to work Sunday as a regular pay day when they are taking you away from your family. The company wants to just extend temporary service, have flexible workers who they don’t have to pay benefits. What people don’t realize is you can’t have wireless without wire lines. They have to be connected. They are infrastructure.”

In **Northern Virginia**, Tony, a wire technician with over 19 years on the job, explained how Verizon had changed for the worse during his time there. “When I started working, this was a totally different company. At the end of the day you knew that the company actually cared about you, and I was proud to say that I worked for Bell Atlantic; it was *the* main company to work for,” he said. “Now it’s just a job, now it’s all about money from the company standpoint.”

Tony said the main issue for workers on strike was the protection of health care and retirement benefits. “You shouldn’t have to put in 30 years on a job, retire, then have the company come along and say that they’re going to put a cap on your pension, that’s just wrong.

“What’s most disheartening about this is that I like doing my job, but things like this [Verizon’s demand for concessions] I find really disheartening. It’s like we want to do our job, but we feel unappreciated. Nobody’s going to give a company their best effort when they feel that

way, and for just that reason, you have many people wondering if it is even worth staying with this job. If they cap my pension, well that's a deal breaker to most people. It's hard for people like me to leave because we've already got so much time here."

John, a wire technician with 16 years of experience, said that Verizon workers regularly had to work grueling schedules because management will understaff its workforce. "If there is a major storm that comes through the area, you are guaranteed to be working 6 or 7 days in a row for an 80-hour workweek. I don't mind overtime, when there is work to be done, but sometimes management will force you to do overtime when there is no work at all, they just are understaffed.

"The company treats us like we're worthless; the upper management likes to force us to work overtime without justification as if having a personal life didn't matter and we don't need days off," he said. "These demands always come from upper management; the guys who are our immediate superiors actually have to put in a lot of work as well, and they don't have a union so they're forced to carry out the orders of the upper management," John stated, adding that Verizon CEO Lowell McAdam makes nearly \$30 million a year.

Scott, a technician who also had 16 years experience, recalled the bitter experience and betrayal of the 2011 Verizon workers' strike, "I'll never forget that," he said, "we had the company over the barrel, with a hurricane coming and the possibility of mass power outages [throughout the East Coast], and the CWA had us return to work because they said [Verizon] was going to bargain in 'good faith.' Then 14 months pass and we end up getting a contract that cut our health care coverage."

When asked why the union had behaved in the way it did, Scott first said that it had been a case of bad judgment by the union, before adding he had fears that the union was colluding with management. "It's all about money now," he said, "The union is like a business. I'm paying \$20 dollars a week in dues and so are other guys. That equates to thousands of dollars a week the union gets from its membership, and all we get is \$200 a week to come picket out here."

Scott recalled the 1996 telecom merger orchestrated by Democratic Party President Bill Clinton. "Bell Atlantic was a good company, then it all changed, and we have the Clintons to thank for that." Scott expressed disgust for the Democratic presidential frontrunner Hillary Clinton.

"Hillary is a liar, she comes from a family of liars," he said.

Darren, a younger worker, expressed support for the nominally "socialist" candidate Bernie Sanders, adding that what currently existed in America was "backward socialism," in which the wealthy live off the impoverishment of the poor. Darren expressed agreement when it was explained that socialism meant the unification of the working class internationally on a political program against capitalism rather than the program of economic nationalism promoted by the unions and Sanders.

In **Scranton, Pennsylvania**, reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with about a dozen workers striking the Verizon's downtown customer service center. Most of the workers on the picket line were veterans of the 2011 strike.

Julie, a call center worker, said that the main issue to her is the threat to jobs. "The contract they're trying to push through will lead to job losses," she said. "They can shift jobs overseas or to nonunion places in other parts of the country."

Joe said that the last contract was a bad deal for workers, and now Verizon is "coming after things they didn't take away in the last strike."

Dave, from Scranton, explained that workers are striking against many years of worsening conditions. "I've been working here for 17 years, and every new contract has been worse than the last," he said. "We're not going to take it anymore."

A WSWs correspondent pointed out that the attack on working-class living standards is targeting sections of the working class one by one, and that the trade unions are leaving each isolated to fight alone: autoworkers,

steel workers, and teachers. Julie added, "and nurses, too."

The Scranton workers agreed when presented with the need to unite the working class and expressed concern when warned that the CWA would send them back to work with a bad deal. "They're going to have a hard time with that," one of them said. "There were a lot of people unhappy with the last contract."

Workers also expressed support for the campaign of Bernie Sanders. The WSWs correspondent argued that Sanders' purpose in the campaign is to draw workers back in behind the Democratic Party, and that what is needed is to build a political party that unites the whole working class. The workers expressed agreement, but continued to speak of their support for Sanders.

"He's more for the working people," Julie said. "He's forcing the media to pay attention to people like us."

When asked what the workers anticipated would happen in the strike, Joe raised his fear that it was going to get sent to the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, as happened in 2011. "If it winds up there it's not good for us," he said. "It's pushed around by lobbyists and corporate interests.

"A lot is riding on this strike," he added. "Not just for us, but for other workers, too."

A retired Verizon employee in **Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania** with 31 years service expressed his support for the strike. "I've worked in the frame, the central office and on the line crew. This has been going on a long time. Verizon is making billions, billions. They are one of the largest and most profitable companies in the world, but it is all about taking from the workers.

"We built their network, we installed their lines and switching equipment, answer the phones and make it all work yet they have been just pushing and pushing and I am glad that we have started to push back.

"Jobs are the most important issue. What kind of life does a person have if one day the company can say you are to report over here or over there and that you have to spend two months in New York or Massachusetts? If there was a storm we would go all over the country. I went to Florida for a while after Hurricane Andrew. But this is different. They just want to be able to send you so they don't have to hire people. They have already been cutting too many jobs.

"I think everyone has to unite together. This is not just Verizon, but every company is cutting back. Look at how rich the rich got after the housing crisis while millions of people are still suffering. Verizon is a global company and we have to unite worldwide."



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