Verizon workers speak as strike enters new week

Our reporters
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As the strike by 39,000 workers at telecom giant Verizon enters a new week, workers are discussing the issues in the strike and the strategy needed to take forward their struggle. The WSWS *Verizon Strike Newsletter* spoke to workers on the picket lines in Northern Virginia and New York City.

Joseph, from Northern Virginia, spoke about his working conditions. “I usually work from 7:30 am until 4:00 pm. During the summer it can get to be about 12 hours a day. That is what I would be working if we were on the job.”

When asked about the cost of living in the Washington, DC area, Joseph asked, “How can you live off [$13] an hour? I told myself a long time ago, as a man, that I would not work for anything less than $20 an hour, and even then you are selling yourself short, with just enough to get by. The bare minimum that a person needs is an apartment, food and a car, not a BMW or anything fancy, but a Toyota at the least.”

Two line workers with over 10 years also spoke to the WSWS but asked to remain anonymous because of possible retribution by management. One said the main concern for strikers were “wages, benefits and the language used in the contract. I don’t care anything about profit-sharing with the company or being allowed to vote on a board or directors, all that does is get me victimized for how I vote on company affairs.”

Speaking of Verizon’s plans to increase the cost of health coverage, the worker said, “I can understand being told to give a little back to keep the cost of our health care just beneath the ‘Cadillac’ plan cut-off point, but this company is asking us to pay four times as much for our health coverage.”

Comparing the current struggle to the 2011 Verizon strike he had participated in, the lineman said, “This time we’ve got the public behind us a little bit more. I think people are beginning to realize that someone needs to stand up. Right now everything is in favor of the corporations; we may even be reaching the point in which workers begin getting issued company scrip.

“Now a lot of companies have this thing called ‘permissive time off,’ in which you don’t actually have paid sick days. You have to ask your manager for permission to take a paid sick day, it all depends on whether or not they like you. I wish a virus or fungal infection would ask me for permission to infect me on Tuesday, so that I could coordinate it with my manager.”

When asked about the conduct of the two unions leading the strike, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), the lineman said, “I wish the union hadn’t called off the 2011 strike when they did, it would have put us in a much better position than we are in now. I saw a lot of our immediate higher-ups lose their benefits, and the union did very little about it. It’s because they are isolating these struggles. The mentality is that the problem is ‘over there’ and not ‘our struggle,’ when it really is.”

“Verizon has this talking point, in which it states that it hasn’t laid anyone off, which is technically true,” the other worker continued. “They don’t lay people off in this area, they offer them a ‘buy-out,’ which saves the company from having to report layoffs to shareholders. What they’ll do is they’ll make it worth workers’ while to leave.”

“This leads to huge problems with understaffing in Virginia, which is a ‘Right to Work’ state and doesn’t maintain any requirements that a certain number of workers be kept to service the population. So now you have a situation where six months of over time were required for certain job titles last year alone, 12 hours a day, for 10 days straight. They will do this and move your normally scheduled off days backward as well. For the young guys this might be fine, but so much for having a family.”

One worker who joined the conversation said that the working conditions were so bad at a FiOS installation center nearby that he would get a doctor’s note to prevent him from ever being sent there again. “From 2012-2015, the installation center had a string of managers, military types, who would bully their line workers. They would show up first thing in the morning and demand to inspect your vehicle for safety violations. If they found that you had left a sweatshirt in the front seat, they would write you up, claiming they found an ‘unsecured deadly object’ in your vehicle.”

Explaining how customers are manipulated by the company, the worker said, “The company is doing a big push for fiber optics installations, so their goal is to discontinue traditional copper lines. They’ll look for slight irregularities in these old lines and force us to tell the owner that the system needs to switch over to FiOS. Now many owners of copper landlines

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have been with these systems for decades and don't want to switch. The management will order their service be disconnected."

The worker noted that the attempts to break apart the communication grid seriously undermined the communications infrastructure, while allowing the management to legally deny that it held a monopoly on services in the area.

When addressing some of the larger political issues facing workers globally, one worker said, "They always seem to have money for wars overseas when there are more than enough problems to fix at home."

When speaking about the need to unite workers internationally against Verizon, a transnational corporation, he said, "They are trying to divide workers from themselves. I'm from Europe, and that is what they're doing with Muslims. It's what Hitler did with the Jews during World War Two."

Andre, a field tech in New York City also spoke to the *Newsletter*. He explained, "The company gets set for what they are going to give us, and then they won't budge. They are now trying to take away rights that former employees fought for and won. The company is trying to dismantle these rights. They want to get rid of job security, healthcare, a livable wage and respect in the workplace.

"I think we should have called the strike when the contract expired, but maybe the union thought the company would bargain in good faith. However, that is why we are here now. I don't think it is right that the company wants to break up your life, and move you away from home for 120 days. You may have a sick member of the family or your parents to take care of. People can't be away for home for so long.

"It is not like the company doesn't have the money. They paid $4.4 billion for AOL a year ago. They are paying $1 to 2 billion to buy XO Communications, and they are getting ready to spend $2-3 billion to buy Yahoo. They have sent us emails about this purchase at work. They are trying to buy up these companies to get a signal frequency to build out their wireless unit more and make the signal stronger. We service the wireless divisions because we install and maintain the G1 circuit the wireless system works on.

"The company has stopped investing in the wire-line side. They are selling off the wire-line side to smaller telecom companies like Broadview and Covad. They have sold off other sections of wire-line like Fairpoint Communications in Maine where there was the long strike in 2013 and 2014. They want to do this because wireless is more profitable, less regulated and nonunion. The store in Brooklyn was unionized, and it is closed now because they are on strike with us.

"The reason 9,000 mostly wireless workers were laid off last fall is because the union was trying to unionize them, and this was intimidation for them as well as for us.

"I can't explain what the union was doing. It is probably a strategy move to go on strike in the middle of the New York primary. I think when one union goes on strike, all the unions should support them. When one group stands up alone, you barely get heard.

"Politics is playing a critical role in us continuing to have a job. You hitch yourself to a party hoping they will help you with your job, but none of the parties are doing that. I do think the working class should have its own party definitely."

Zujen, a frame tech with 20 years with Verizon, said, "We're not even asking for raises, we just want what's fair. Verizon expects us to give up everything. They expect us to work without any job security, to pay three times more than we used to pay for benefits. They expect us to just pick up and leave our families for up to five months at a time and work anywhere from Boston down to Virginia. They are trying to get rid of us and actually want us to quit.

"Verizon is trying to go all wireless. We're trying to unite with the wireless workers and bring them into the union but the company will fire anyone that supports joining. Just recently a Verizon Wireless worker from the Baybridge location was fired for talking to other workers about trying to unite Wireless and Telecom. They won't admit that was the reason but it was definitely the reason.

"There's a lot of support for us out there—you can tell from the people passing by. We've had students and kids come out and ask to walk with us on the picket line. It would be wonderful if everyone went on strike at once, from Con Ed to teachers. That should really happen. This time it's us but the next time it's going to be them.

"Most of us have families and children to support. How do they expect us to survive? Verizon makes over a billion dollars in profit a month. The CEO [Lowell McAdam] makes $80,000 dollars a day! And they'd rather see us on the street.

"Those of us who've been here for over 20 years are the ones who actually built this entire infrastructure. My father put in 30 years for the company. I remember being 12 years old and walking the picket line with him back in 1989. This is in my blood. The people running the company now have totally lost touch. They never had it. How can they with the kind of money they're making? All they see are dollar signs."

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