

# Unions try to isolate embattled Verizon strikers

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Nearly 40,000 workers across the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states remain on strike against the telecom giant Verizon, which is demanding sweeping health care and pension cuts, the further outsourcing of jobs and a free hand to transfer workers across wide geographic areas for weeks or months at a time.

After forcing workers to labor without a contract for eight months, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) called the current strike on April 13. The strike is the largest in the United States since Verizon workers struck in 2011, which the CWA and IBEW shut down after two weeks before subsequently accepting deep health care concessions.

Verizon is number six on the *Forbes* list of America's 25 most profitable companies, with \$18 billion in earnings in 2015 and \$39 billion in profits over the last three years. Over the last two years alone the company has paid out \$16 billion dollars in dividends, mostly to its wealthiest investors. Lowell McAdam, the Verizon CEO, is paid \$18 million a year in salaries, stock shares and other compensation, while the top five executives at Verizon bring in a total of more than \$47 million a year.

The company is digging in for a long fight, with McAdam saying the company must implement "common-sense reforms to rein in the cost" of health insurance for active and retired workers and their dependents. He pointed to the fact that the company is currently subject to the "Cadillac tax on excessive plans as defined by the Affordable Healthcare Act."

Verizon executives have long been preparing for a walkout. "Let's make it clear, we are ready for a strike," Bob Mudge, president of Verizon's wireline network operations, boasted in a news release on the company web site last week. He added, "Verizon's strike readiness teams have been preparing for a strike since early 2015."

The company has "trained thousands of nonunion employees to fill in for those walking a picket line" and has reassigned employees "from all parts of the U.S. and all parts of the business including finance, marketing, real estate, engineering and more" to handle "customer inquiries, inside and outside network plant management, fiber and copper network maintenance and repair, both on the ground and on our poles."

According to Verizon workers, the company has moved nearly all managers who have not been reassigned to do jobs of

striking workers to the Chesapeake complex in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Joseph, a wire worker with less than five years on the job in Northern Virginia, told the *WSWS Verizon Strike Newsletter* that there was pressure building up on management due to an influx of customer requests for services. "I have heard that there are about 6,400 open tickets in northern Virginia alone," said Joseph, referring to the number of new customer requests for services that are beginning to pile up. Joseph said that management and the strikebreaker's average response times to the open requests were two tickets a day.

"I know management is being forced to work 12-hour shifts right now, 6-7 days a week," he added. "Eventually, management will not be able to handle what's going on. People are going to start cashing in their Verizon services for the networks of competitors; people I know are saying that this strike could go for weeks or even months. I consider myself a master wire technician, and I still make mistakes. What we do on a line you can't just take a few classes for."

A letter sent to the *WSWS* revealed the abusive conditions facing managers. "My husband was sent to cover for the strikers. We have a family of 7 and our oldest was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma 5 months ago. I am a stay at home wife and mother. My husband works while I take care of our family. With one-day notice, he was forced to get on a flight to cover for the people striking, and we have no idea when he will be home. Verizon is not a company that cares about honest hard working employees that have families. If they did, my husband would be home where he is desperately needed. I am so stressed and overwhelmed with this entire situation."

The strike is being closely monitored by the Obama administration, which has relied on the trade union bureaucracy to suppress every form of class struggle in order to drive down wages and shift the burden of health and pension benefits from corporate America to the backs of workers. In 2009 work stoppages fell to their lowest level since the end of World War II, with only five strikes involving 1,000 workers or more, and an average of 13 work stoppages in each of Obama's seven years in office. By contrast, there were 470 strikes and lockouts in 1952, and 424 in 1974.

The AFL-CIO and Change to Win labor federations have

done everything to isolate and defeat the embattled Verizon workers. They fear that it could spark a far broader mobilization of workers who are angered over stagnating and falling wages amid a supposed economic recovery that has only benefited the super-rich.

On Saturday, the International Association of Machinists (IAM) pushed through a four-year extension of its agreement with United Continental, which covers 30,000 airline customer-service agents and ramp workers. Last February, mechanics at United Continental, voted by a 93 percent margin to reject a tentative contract agreement between the Teamsters and airline management. The deal included a pay increase that would have been offset by increased medical costs and work rule changes that would result in less overtime.

Last Friday, Obama's Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker met with officials from the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and the Pacific Maritime Association to discuss extending the six-year contract they agreed to last year to 10 years. In 2015, Obama's labor secretary intervened to prevent a strike by West Coast dockworkers before the ILWU agreed to the deal, which also increased health care costs while maintaining a second tier of casualized labor on the docks.

Although their labor agreements expired last summer, the United Steelworkers continues to force ArcelorMittal workers to work without a contract, and the Chicago Teachers Union is doing the same.

In the face of the provocations by Verizon, the CWA and IBEW leadership have restricted the activity of strikers to isolated picketing and various protest stunts coordinated with other unions and the Democratic Party. The CWA, which endorsed the campaign of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, has timed the strike to coincide with Tuesday's Democratic Primary in New York State, where Sanders and Clinton are in a close contest.

CWA Local 1101, which bargains for 3,500 workers, canceled its general membership meeting scheduled for Tuesday "due to Verizon strike activity," saying it will "send an announcement with a new date when it is rescheduled." The postponement protects the union bureaucracy from rank-and-file workers who would challenge them over the strategy of the strike. It also raises the possibility that the CWA could shut down the strike after the primaries and announce that it will accept federal mediation overseen by the Obama administration.

While CWA Local 1101 officials have told picketers that they would not send workers back to work without a contract—like the CWA did in 2011—such a decision would be made on the national level, and despite various posturing by local union officials would be accepted. Workers who had saved up for a strike last August were caught unawares by the sudden strike call last week and have been forced to subsist on \$300 a week in strike pay.

While putting strikers on starvation rations, according to its 2015 report to the US Labor Department, the CWA has a staggering \$1.7 billion in marketable securities, which could easily be converted to cash.

The unions, which have already reportedly offered some \$200 million in concessions, have downplayed workers' major demands over health care, pensions, outsourcing and extended transfers. Instead, the CWA has almost exclusively centered its slogans on the demand for Verizon to expand its FiOS fiber optic cable system, which the union sees as crucial to building its dues base, which has fallen precipitously as the company shifts to nonunion wireless services.

The union's demand is being coordinated with the Democrats, who have repeatedly handed the telecom giants multibillion-dollar subsidies to expand their broadband systems into urban and rural areas, which Verizon considers too unprofitable for investment. Since 2015, Obama's Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has provided \$1.8 billion a year to Verizon and AT&T, while allowing the carriers to raise the rates they can charge for basic phone service, supposedly to subsidize the cost of expanding the system, which is still restricted to a tiny portion of the country.

In order to prevent another sellout deal, rank-and-file workers must take the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the CWA and IBEW and fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class against the telecommunications giant and both big-business parties that back it.



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