

Verizon strike at critical juncture

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19 April 2016

The walkout by 39,000 Verizon workers in the northeastern and mid-Atlantic states is at a critical juncture. The determination of workers to resist the telecom giant's sweeping concession demands was shown in the mass picket Monday morning involving thousands of workers in front of a mid-town Manhattan hotel, which was reportedly housing strikebreakers.

The strike has become a focal point of opposition with broad sections of workers and youth, from firefighters and fast-food workers to teachers and college students expressing their support. Verizon workers are expressing a growing mood of resistance in the working class, which has suffered a decades-long decline in living standards even as corporate profits, CEO pay and the stock markets hit record highs.

It has become clear, however, that the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) have no strategy or intention to win the strike. In fact, every action taken by the unions has only aided and abetted corporate management and encouraged its intransigence. Corporate executives like CEO Lowell McAdam long ago took the measure of the CWA and IBEW leaders and know it is only a matter of time before they sell out the Verizon workers again.

While the CWA and IBEW forced workers to labor without a contract for eight months and offered \$200 million in givebacks, Verizon was mapping out plans to draw in managers from throughout the country and train replacements to keep its operations going in the event of the strike it was provoking. The company has refused to engage in further talks and is demanding that the union accept federal mediation, knowing full well the outcome would be no different than 2011, when the CWA accepted deep health care concessions.

Opposed to any real struggle, which would disrupt its corporatist "partnership" with the company and its relations with the Democratic Party, the CWA and other unions have isolated the embattled Verizon workers. Even though all telecom workers are facing the same attacks—the slashing of jobs, outsourcing, attacks on health care and pensions—last week the CWA ordered 15,000 AT&T West workers in California, Nevada and Hawaii to remain on the job without a contract after the expiration of its previous agreement. The CWA defied the overwhelming strike vote by AT&T workers against the highly profitable company, which spent \$49 billion to buy DirectTV last year and continues to demand, in the

words of the CWA, "outrageous concessions."

While leaving workers vulnerable to this coordinated attack, the unions have tried to sow deadly complacency among workers. They have claimed that the giant corporations, which have the full backing of both big-business parties, the courts and federal mediators, can be pushed back through toothless publicity stunts, media attention and empty pronouncements of support from Democrats like Bernie Sanders, Bill and Hillary Clinton and New York Senator Chuck Schumer.

The entire strategy of the CWA and IBEW has been to subordinate the fight of Verizon workers to the political maneuvers of the Democrats, who are holding their presidential primary in New York today. Former president Bill Clinton, who visited picket lines in Buffalo, New York Monday, spearheaded the deregulation of the telecommunications industry in 1996, which encouraged the wave of mergers and acquisitions that resulted in the monopolization of the industry and the wiping out of hundreds of thousands of jobs.

The Obama administration, with the full support of Clinton and the CWA's candidate Bernie Sanders, implemented the misnamed Affordable Care Act, which is being used by Verizon and the rest of corporate America to force workers to accept substandard coverage and shift the burden onto the backs of workers.

Both political parties have also handed billions to Verizon and AT&T to subsidize the supposed expansion of their fiber optic systems, while lifting caps on the rates they charge customers. The outcome of this can be seen in the planned FiOS buildout in Boston where Verizon is apparently using taxpayer money and publicly owned infrastructure, combined with the "labor flexibility" concessions granted by the IBEW and new labor-saving technology to reap windfall profits.

If this struggle is not to be defeated like the 2011 strike and countless other battles betrayed by the AFL-CIO and the Change to Win labor federations, everything depends on the independent initiative of rank-and-file workers themselves. The Socialist Equality Party and the WSWs *Verizon Strike Newsletter* urge workers to elect new bodies of self-representation: rank-and-file strike committees that are democratically controlled by workers themselves and free from the authority of every faction of the CWA and IBEW bureaucracies and both big-business political parties.

These committees must oppose the sabotage of the strike,

including the possibility that the CWA will simply shut it down shortly after the New York State primaries. Instead, Verizon workers should fight for the mobilization of the broadest sections of the working class—auto and steel workers, teachers and other public sector workers, high school and college students and other sections of workers—to come to their defense. This should be the beginning of a common industrial and political counteroffensive against the government-backed corporate onslaught on the working class.

Striking Verizon workers at the rally in mid-town Manhattan spoke to the strike newsletter Monday. Gina Woods, an inside tech, said, “We are fighting for our benefits, jobs, rights, pensions and medical. This is our livelihood. They want to cap our pensions at 30 years, increase our medical costs, but not give us a raise enough to cover the cost of the health care cuts. They want to outsource all of our jobs from customer service to inside technical jobs. They can’t outsource the outside tech jobs. But they want to send people 80 miles from home at the drop of a dime.

“The union said if they don’t take these four issues: wages, pensions, outsourcing and medical off the table, they will not meet with the company again. The company doesn’t want to hear that their two percent wage increase does not cover the medical costs.

“The company has prepared. I have heard they now have 17,000 managers to cover for 40,000 workers. Everything is backed up, and the customers are suffering from this. We should not have gone back so quickly in 2011. We are willing to stay out.”

Steven Delorbe, a field tech from the Bronx, criticized the CWA Local 1101’s decision to cancel its Tuesday general membership meeting. “Because of what is going on right now, you would want to get some information about what is taking place. I didn’t learn anything from the speakers this morning. I would like to know how the strike is progressing in getting us to the bargaining table. I think we know why the strike was called now because the company hasn’t budged in 10 months. I think the timing worked out with the primary candidates in the city.

“They are trying to outsource business offices across the country and overseas. I don’t have a comment on the 40 percent tax Obamacare is placing on our health care coverage as a ‘Cadillac policy’ but we are not happy with the cuts. I need to protect my family, and up until the last contract we had full all-costs-paid coverage. After the 2011 strike when we went back to work before the hurricane, we took concessions and started to have to pay for health care. I wasn’t sure of why we went back in 2011. I thought staying out longer would have helped us avoid more concessions then.”

The WSWS *Verizon Strike Newsletter* also spoke with strikers in Northern Virginia.

One worker with over 20 years experience, who asked to remain anonymous out of concern the company would

victimize him, said he had seen the WSWS article on Twitter. Although he did not consider himself a socialist, he was supportive and said that the WSWS was “doing a good job” covering the strike.

He noted that there was an “atmosphere of conflict” in the workplace, where the workers are “completely scrutinized and monitored.” Every minute there is a threat of discipline. “I’ve never seen a more hostile work climate.”

He said that coming to work was sort of like being a “battered spouse,” where you kept on coming back despite knowing that you were just waiting for the next beating.

“There are all types of arbitrary rules that can be used by management to discipline workers. For example, you can be disciplined for having an untidy truck, such as just leaving a clipboard on the seat. No electronics are allowed in the vans, including cell phones, which have to be secured in the back of the van. If a supervisor calls their cell phone and they pick up, they will get in trouble.”

Jerry, a service technician with 15 years with the company, said these rules were just another company strategy to get rid of workers. Service techs are often “set up to fail,” he said. For example, they could be assigned six jobs between 8am and 12pm, which is impossible to accomplish. The service techs, however, are responsible for calling up the customers they can’t get to and renegotiate a service time. If a customer complains, the service tech can be written up for a “customer mistreat.”

Verizon workers have not seen a significant pay raise in years, he said. In fact, it has felt like it has been years since they had gotten anything of lasting substance. He said it was similar to what was seen with the concessions given up by the UAW.

When asked about the Democratic Party, another service technician said he has “barked in our union hall for years that we are supporting Democrats that forget all about us” after they are elected. “We need a strong working-class party, a socialist party,” he said.

Noting the low number of strikes, the worker felt that “the American people seem to have been asleep.” A WSWS reporter noted that the trade unions have largely been responsible for suppressing the class struggle. The worker agreed, saying that the unions were like “a toothless dog” only concerned with capturing dues.

“The union is a business just as much as Verizon is a business,” the worker observed.



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