Verizon workers confront strikebreaking operation

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With the strike by 39,000 Verizon workers reaching its one-week mark today, tensions are rising over the intransigence of the telecom company, which is demanding sweeping health and pension concessions, the further outsourcing of jobs and the power to transfer existing workers long distances for weeks or months at time in order to cut labor costs.

Last year, the company reduced its payroll by 1,000 workers through buyouts, and it is determined to transform its workforce into low-paid on-call laborers with few if any benefits. Meanwhile, the company, which is number 15 on the Fortune 500 list of America's most profitable companies, spent $4.4 billion to acquire AOL and paid out billions in dividends to its wealthiest investors and top executives.

It is clear that the company was determined to provoke a strike. It has spent months training some 20,000 managers and contractors to maintain operations during the walkout. The decision by the Communications Workers of America (CWA) to force workers to continue on the job after the contract expiration last August gave Verizon an extra eight months to plan the strikebreaking operation.

The company refuses to negotiate and is calling for the CWA to accept federal mediation by the Obama administration. In 2011, the CWA called off a strike after two weeks and then accepted a mediator's ruling in 2012 that imposed first-ever out-of-pocket health care costs on workers.

Large numbers of workers are expected today for a mass picket at the company's Chesapeake center in the Washington, DC suburb of Silver Spring, Maryland. Verizon has transferred call center, engineering and sales managers from throughout the country to the facility to coordinate the company's continuing operations.

Verizon mailed an April 15 letter to all strikers from Karyn Stetz, the vice president of human resources, who informed workers that "all union-represented employees have the legal right to work during the strike if they so choose." She added, "We respect the personal choice each individual must make in this situation."

Workers are determined to fight, but the actions of the CWA and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) have repeatedly undermined the battle. From the very beginning, the unions, which offered $200 million in concessions, have blocked any real mobilization of workers. Last week the CWA ordered 9,400 AT&T West workers in California and other states to continue working without a contract, thereby preventing a joint strike by telecom workers on both coasts.

The unions have instead subordinated the strike to the political maneuvers of various Democratic politicians, from presidential candidates Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton to New York Senator Charles Schumer and Governor Andrew Cuomo.

While downplaying workers' concerns over health and pensions concessions, the unions have centered their agitation on the demand that Verizon expand its FiOS fiber optic system. This would expand the dues-paying base of the CWA, which no doubt would offer the "necessary" concessions to Verizon to secure this work.

The union has also criticized the company for outsourcing call center jobs to Mexico and the Philippines, echoing the economic nationalism of the United Steelworkers and the United Auto Workers. Hostile to any struggle to unite workers against the global telecom giants, the unions use anti-foreigner agitation to conceal their collaboration in the cost-cutting of the US-based transnationals.

Far from being "friends" of the workers, the Democrats have spearheaded the deregulation of the telecommunications industry and provided billions in subsidies to Verizon, AT&T and other companies. In addition, the Obama administration has worked with corporate America to shift the cost of health care and pensions onto the backs of workers.

If Verizon workers were to rebel against the stranglehold of the unions and spread the struggle to other sections of workers, New York's Andrew Cuomo, Pennsylvania's Tom Wolf, Virginia's Terry McAuliffe and other Democratic governors would not hesitate to use state violence and mass arrests against strikers.

As the strike continues, economic pressures will increase on workers, many of whom had saved up for a strike in August but exhausted their savings as the unions kept them at work. The CWA has told workers in New York, where 13,900, or more than one-third of the strikers live—to apply for unemployment benefits, which provide a weekly maximum of $420.

According to a strike web site, "The CWA Members Relief Fund provides payment of $200 per week per striker beginning on the 15th day of a strike, increasing to $300 week on the 29th day of a strike, and increasing to $400 on the 57th day of a strike." The site also informed strikers that Verizon would cut them off medical benefits by the end of the month, and that the CWA Defense Fund would only pay out benefits in "extreme cases" and only after a

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"pre-approval" process from the union. The site added, "Vision and dental payments will not be paid from the Members Defense Fund."

Whatever its rhetoric about "solidarity," the CWA is preparing to starve strikers into submission. As one striking worker told the WSWS *Verizon Strike Newsletter*, CWA President Chris Shelton and other union bureaucrats "have long used the defense fund as their slush fund."

According to the Biennial Report of the Defense Fund Oversight Committee, in April 2013 delegates to the CWA Convention approved the diversion of $12,622,500 from the defense funds to a new "Growth Fund," to "support and enhance the union's movement building, organizing, leadership development, research, industry analysis and efforts to achieve economic justice, including the hiring of staff needed to provide resources for launching new and sustaining existing efforts."

This money was one-half of the earnings from the Robert Lilja Members' Relief Fund (RLMRF), which had a balance as of March 31, 2014 of $459,417,000. "Total investment earnings during the 2012 calendar year were $25,245,000. According to the rules, one-half of these earnings, or $12,622,500 was moved to the Growth Fund."

According to reports filed with the US Labor Department, the CWA had $1.7 billion in marketable securities and disbursed $268,020,412 in staff salaries and other expenses.

If the struggle of Verizon workers 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 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.

Verizon workers should fight for the mobilization of the broadest sections of the working class—telecom, 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.

Peggy, a retired Verizon worker from Bronx, New York, wrote to the *Newsletter*, saying, "This strike affects us as much as those that are walking the picket lines. I went through many strikes while I worked there and it was not easy. I feel for the 36,000 that are walking. However, there is no way this should be 'settled' the way the union wants—the workers deserve more, and Verizon can pay it. Shame on you, Verizon—we built you—from New York Tel to NYNEX to Bell Atlantic to Verizon. How can you treat us this way?"

Dan, a striker with 12 years' service from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, told the *Newsletter*, "For us, jobs are the most important thing. The company wants to move us anywhere without any kind of notice. They want to be able to say that you have to go to New York, DC or Boston for two months at a time. Then when you get back they could send you somewhere else. They are treating us like we are just casual labor. We have families. I already miss out on a lot of my kids' games and school stuff because of the hours we work. We can't just get up and leave home. If the company needs more help in some area, they need to hire people there not force people to move.

"Verizon has been doing this a long time. They are making billions, but they want to make more and they figure with the job market the way it is, we should be willing to take anything. But if they push us back on this, they will never give it back. It is not only Verizon. Every company is cutting its employees. Health care and pensions, nobody gets those anymore. Everything in the country is benefiting the rich. The politicians don't care about us."

Another Pittsburgh striker, Eric, added, "Management knew this was coming. They have been harassing us, writing people up for every little thing. They had a quota they had to meet. It didn't matter whether you did something wrong or not, but each supervisor had to have so many write-ups each month. This is happening to everyone. Workers everywhere need to stand up."

On the picket line in downtown Brooklyn, Maria, a central office technician with 20 years' experience, told the *Newsletter*, "Things we fought for many years ago are all being taken from us now. Something as simple as seeing a doctor has become very difficult. They're trying to take wages from us. They don't want to pay overtime for working on Sundays. I work the night shift, which we used to get paid an extra 'night differential' for, and now they don't want to pay that anymore. I feel like we're going back 40 years, where there was no union and the worker was nobody."

Asked about the CWA betrayal of the 2011 strike, Maria said, "For me that was unforgivable. After that I felt the union didn't really represent me. The last contract they just didn't do their job and I felt that they bargained at the top for themselves and weren't thinking of us at all. But I'm out here again because we need to come out and fight for ourselves, for the working people and to make our voices heard. The people at the top are all making the big bucks and they want to push us down and down."

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