“It’s reached a point where we had to stand up to them, and we are”

Striking Verizon workers speak out in Maryland, Pennsylvania and New York

Our reporters
21 April 2016

Hundreds of Verizon workers picketed a Verizon facility in Silver Spring, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, DC, which is being used to coordinate the company’s strikebreaking operations. Strikers from several states converged on the massive facility, crossing a major highway while shouting, “Scabs go home!”

The giant telecom company has spent months preparing for the strike and has trained 20,000 managers and contractors. Call center, engineering and sales managers have been brought into the Maryland facility from as far away as Texas to counter the impact of the eight-day strike by 39,000 Verizon workers along the US East Coast.

Verizon is refusing to back away from its demands for deep health and pension concessions, the continued outsourcing of jobs and the power to transfer workers long distances for weeks or months at a time. The highly profitable company, which last year spent billions buying AOL, wants to slash more jobs and transform its wireline workforce, which services the company’s landline phone business and FiOS broadband system, into low-paid, on-call workers.

While workers expressed their determination to fight, the Communications Workers of America sought to turn the event into a rally for the Democratic Party. At a rally before the picket, CWA officials paraded Maryland Congresswoman Donna Edwards before strikers. Far from defending workers, the Democrats have long backed the telecommunication monopolies, and Verizon is now using Obama’s Cadillac Tax on supposedly overgenerous health benefits to force strikers to accept substandard care and far greater out-of-pocket costs.

Citing supposed “national security” concerns during the 2011 strike, the FBI, under the direction of Obama’s Justice Department, launched an investigation into Verizon’s bogus claims that strikers were “sabotaging” critical infrastructure. One FBI special agent issued a provocative email connecting the alleged incidents to the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Striking workers at the Maryland picket spoke with the WSWS *Verizon Strike Newsletter* about their struggle. Troy, a Verizon worker with 27 years of experience, said, “I was in the 2011 strike and the four-month-long strike in 1989. I’m ready to be out here for four months or longer if that is what it takes. In the 2011 strike we were out here for two weeks, and then we got sold out by the union.

“The upper echelons of the union are always willing to make deals with the company. So, now you don’t know what you are going to get. I’m planning on retiring in a few years, and I don’t know what the company is going to do. I already have a plan B and C, if they change things.

“Everything has already gotten worse since I started working here. Before, this was a more worker friendly environment. I used to recommend this to my friends and family. Now I wouldn’t recommend this job to a dog.

“Every few years now we go out on strike, and the company is trying to outsource everything.”

The *Newsletter* also spoke with a striking worker from Northern Virginia who wanted to remain anonymous out of concern that he would face retribution from the company and the union. Referring to the WSWS he said, “I read your leaflet, and I thought it was interesting. I do think the workers [on strike] are being controlled by both the company and the union.”

Speaking on the clause the CWA sanctioned as part of its back-to-work agreement from the last strike, which allows the company to fire workers for alleged strike “misconduct,” including calling strikebreakers names, the worker said, “The union signed an agreement with the company that allows the company to define what is and what isn’t ‘hate speech.’ It’s essentially handcuffing its members.”

Speaking more broadly, the worker noted, “Everything the union seems to do is reactionary, if it reacts at all. We always hear the same old cry about what the company is doing, this and that, and how terrible it is. We know how bad the company is. What I want to know is what you’re [the

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union] doing about it. It's the same tactic all the time. We are forced to go to the labor courts, or vote for someone in an election. There's never any real action."

The worker added, "My belief is that a wildcat is the best way forward, because then you're actually stopping the company completely, but they've illegalized it everywhere. There was a situation where we organized a sickout [at a garage], and we were warned by our union that, technically, it constituted a wildcat, and if we did it again the union wouldn't help us."

The WSWS also spoke to strikers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Terry, who has eight years at Verizon, said jobs and health care are the main issues. "Verizon wants to move our jobs. They want to be able to transfer us 100 miles without any notice. We are trying to keep our jobs here in Pittsburgh. I would have to uproot my family and my whole life.

"As far as health care, they want us to pay more for it, and they are not giving us a raise to compensate. Our health care used to be completely paid for. In the last contract we had to start paying I think 12 percent, and now they want to take that up more.

"Three years ago we weren't even paying for health care, now we are. But when you profit $1.8 billion a month and you are trying to take away from the little guy, it hurts. We are the ones who keep this company together, we are the ones who deal with the customers, who do all the hard work, yet our CEO makes $22, $25 million a year.

"People need to stick together. I think it is a good thing to have rights. I think everyone should have a good paying job."

Charles, with seven years, said, "Definitely job security is the major issue. No one wants to move from where they are living now. It would be devastating for me and my family if I had to move anywhere. I have one child. I've worked five years here and two in New Jersey. They can make you move for two months to anywhere or transfer you up to 100 miles. Both of those things are on the table."

Jackson, Jennifer and Deana work in one of Verizon's massive customer call centers. Jennifer said, "It is all about corporate greed. We are not asking for anything, we would just like to keep what we have. Verizon makes $1.5 billion a month, and they refuse to let us keep what we have."

Jackson said, "I just want to maintain. I want to keep my household together. Verizon is taking away everything. They don't care about anything. They don't care about the working class people. This is happening to workers all over. They are trying to stomp and destroy."

Jennifer added, "They are trying to squash the middle class, you are either very, very poor or you are uber rich. There is no middle class. We are just trying to make an honest living to raise our families."

Deana said, "Maybe six or eight months ago, they moved the Verizon Wireless call center to another state, and if the workers wanted to keep their job, they also had to move. The call center was in Cranberry Township."

Responding to the need to unite the working class throughout the world so everyone can have a decent living, Jennifer said, "Absolutely, they [workers outside the US] will do anything they are so poverty stricken, they are just trying to maintain their families as well. That is why companies send work to poverty stricken areas."

The *Newsletter* also spoke with strikers at a rally in Bronx, New York Wednesday. "It's day eight already," said Fitz. "This is a defining strike. Most members have devoted a minimum of 15 to 20 years to this company so it could make huge profits. We maintain the infrastructure, and now we're just being pushed to the side. Everything we are fighting for was fought for in the past, nothing's ever been given to us. We fought for health benefits, pension benefits, now the company just wants to kill them.

"We're fighting to simply keep the things we have. The struggle for fair wages and labor is a worldwide struggle. And the sooner people realize that the better."

Another striker, Joe, added, "We work so hard and the company wants to take so much away. I can't get my head around why someone would want to take so much money from the people who create all the money. It seems the higher up you are the more disconnected you are from the worker. I mean being out of contract since August it's reached a point where we had to stand up to them. And we are."

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