

“The company makes a billion dollars every quarter and is trying to take away everything”

Verizon refuses to budge on takeaway demands

Jerry White
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Top executives at Verizon are remaining intransigent in their demands for sweeping health care, pension, wage and other concessions as the strike by 39,000 telecom workers in the Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic US states entered its second week Thursday. After negotiations went nowhere earlier in the week, the company ramped up its provocations against workers, accusing strikers of “sabotage” and demanding the arrest of workers allegedly engaged in “criminal acts.”

On Tuesday, negotiators from the Communications Workers of America (CWA) District 1 and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 2213 and New England Regional Committees reportedly met with the Verizon’s bargainers in Rye, New York.

Union officials said the company refused to budge on its 6.5 percent wage increase over the three-year term of the contract, its demand for “competitive retirement benefits” and “structural changes” to its health plan due to rising health care costs. The company also wants virtually unlimited power to transfer workers over wide geographic areas for months at a time to make up for manpower shortages.

It is clear that Verizon—and the powerful financial interests behind it—provoked the strike in order to deliver a punishing defeat to workers and roll back the gains won by workers over generations of struggle. While union leaders were offering hundreds of million of dollars in concessions and forcing workers to labor without a contract for eight months, the company was carefully putting its strikebreaking plans into effect.

An article Thursday on the web site 24/7 Wall St. noted “Strikebreakers are hard at work at Verizon Communications Inc. (NYSE: VZ), some working 12-hour shifts to fill in for some 40,000 union workers on strike since April 13. Verizon is already quite experienced when it comes to strikes by the Communication Workers of America, but there are crucial differences between this strike and the five others since 1971. This time, Verizon looks very well prepared.”

It continued, “In terms of short-term preparation, after streamlining its training process after a two-week strike of 45,000 workers in 2011, the telecom giant was able to organize 10,000 strikebreakers in advance and have them already trained on

contingency. That replaces less than a quarter of the striking workforce, but depending on the efficiency of non-union replacements over union labor, it may have Verizon operating at more than a quarter capacity of the strikers during the strike. The very fact that training was set up in advance shows that the strike may be a planned move by Verizon.”

In the face of this attack, the CWA and IBEW have done nothing but organize various publicity stunts and photo-ops with Democratic Party politicians from Bill and Hillary Clinton to Bernie Sanders, whom the CWA endorsed. The union officials have sown the most sickening complacency by claiming such impotent measures will “force the company to bargain.”

As one worker noted, the “CWA had bet the entire farm on the Democratic primary in New York. Now that the Bernie [Sanders] ship sank they have no clue what to do next. There’s no leadership from the local. We’re standing in the street with nothing to show for it.”

There is enormous support for a genuine struggle, with striking workers winning widespread sympathy from workers in New York City, Boston and other cities. Typical was the sentiment expressed by a New York City school bus driver, Sonia Concepcion, who was parked where she could watch the picket line of Verizon workers.

Asked by the WSW *Verizon Strike Newsletter* what she thought about the telecom workers’ struggle, she said, “You know we went through that too. [Former New York Mayor] Bloomberg gave the green light to owners of the school bus companies to do whatever they want, and the [Current Mayor] Bill de Blasio does the same. Obama does not do anything. They only give cheap medical, take it away to put it in their pocket. We should all be together, like school bus, sanitation, teachers, home health care—all go on strike in one shot. Workers should be out together.”

The CWA, IBEW, AFL-CIO and Change to Win unions, which are aligned with Obama and the Democrats, are opposed to such a unified struggle. They are concerned that a successful fight by Verizon workers would serve as catalyst for a far broader movement of the working class, which under the Obama administration has suffered the longest period of wage stagnation since the Great Depression even as corporate profits, CEO pay and

the stock market hit record levels.

The main concern of the CWA and the IBEW is to expand their dues-paying membership by joining the Democrats to pressure Verizon to expand its FiOS fiber optic system to less profitable markets. The unions are more than willing to impose whatever concessions are needed to accomplish this goal, as well as to get a bigger foothold in Verizon's largely nonunion wireless division.

The treachery of the unions has opened up workers to great dangers, including mass firings, arrests and frame ups. After the betrayal of the strike in 2011, Dennis Trainor, now CWA District 1 vice president, agreed to a "back to work settlement" that gave the green light to the firing of workers for picket line "misconduct" and using "hate speech" against scabs.

The stakes have now been raised, with charges that strikers are carrying out "sabotage." According to the telecom industry web site fiercecable.com, "Verizon said that it has experienced 24 separate instances of sabotage in which 'criminals have damaged or destroyed critical network facilities,' with some of these occurrences leading to customer outages."

"We will find out who's behind these highly dangerous criminal acts and we will pursue criminal charges," Michael Mason, Verizon's chief security officer, said in a statement. "These perpetrators are putting lives at risk and these dangerous acts need to stop."

The company made the same allegations in 2011. Citing "national security" concerns, the FBI, under the direction of Obama's Justice Department, opened up an investigation into the bogus claims, with one FBI special agent issuing a provocative email connecting the alleged incidents to the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Soon afterwards, the *New York Post* reported that New York City deployed police officers, including members of an anti-terror unit, to escort strikebreakers across picket lines and monitor picketers.

If the strike is not to be isolated and defeated, workers must take the initiative themselves, through the formation of rank-and-file strike committees, to reach out to the broadest sections of the working class to wage a common struggle to defend the social rights of all workers.

On Wednesday, over 1,000 workers rallied outside of Verizon's Chesapeake Complex in Silver Spring, Maryland, where managers and contractors from around the country have been brought in to coordinate the company's strikebreaking operations.

Several workers at the mass picket spoke to the WSWs *Verizon Strike Newsletter*. Timothy said he had "concerns about the direction Verizon was heading." After the 2011 strike, wire technicians had been forced to work 10-12 hours daily by the company, as well as deal with harassment by management. "It feels like we've got a boot on our neck," he said.

Gail, a customer service technician with over 14 years at Verizon, described her job as being a "customer service technician as well as customer psychiatrist, we basically put out fires for the company." Gail said she had a "problem with us workers having to make sacrifices, why doesn't management ever make sacrifices? They all have gotten raises."

Regarding the CWA sellout in 2011 she said, "We ended up

giving up our health care coverage, and then giving, and giving and giving." Speaking of Obama's so-called Cadillac Tax, which the company is citing to demand higher health care contributions from workers, Gail said, "I don't know what that means to have 'too good a health care plan.' Is it too generous because I don't have to mortgage my home in order to receive health treatment?"

"The Democrats and Republicans could care less about working people, unless you're a person of means. In [the Washington, DC] area, I see homes going for over \$800,000 and more, how can a working person afford that?"

Reporters for the *Newsletter* also spoke with strikers at Verizon's building in mid-Manhattan Thursday. Val, a technician for 20 years, thought the union would not shut down the strike like it did after two weeks in 2011. "What is different is the union is not going to break the strike before a contract. In 2011, the union sold out because it sent us back to work without a contract. The company wants arbitration but we always get screwed in arbitration.

"I think that when the unions were put in place, they were fighting especially for basic things like safety, like after the Triangle Shirt Waist factory fire. Until the last strike, we were staying at a level playing field. Now we are paying for medical. Now the unions are just collecting dues. It would be good if everybody, all the workers, got together like you suggest. Unions started with a rank-and-file movement."

Al, a Verizon technician with 28 years' experience, pointed out, "People are not hearing about the strike because Verizon has ties with broadcast networks, stadiums and events with which they try squash a lot of the news about our strike. Even ads we take out sometimes are rejected. Some of the media here won't take them.

"I think the biggest thing about this strike is that Verizon has a CEO [Lowell McAdam] who does not even bother to hide the fact that he wants to break the union. The previous CEO, Ivan Seidenberg, even if he did not like the union, he respected it. He had come up from being a wire-splicer helper. I think I understand what capitalism is but capitalism has changed. Now they want us to take cuts in everything: health care, pensions. I am out here because for 20 years we have lost benefits. This company makes a billion dollars every quarter and is trying to take away benefits."

In a message posted on the WSWs Verizon Strike Newsletter Facebook page, a striker praised the *Newsletter* for telling the truth. "I'm a picketer from the West 39 Street FiOS garage in NYC. The mainstream media has almost totally ignored our strike except when politicians stopped by the line during the primaries. This newsletter is the best source I've found for keeping up to date on thing. It's independent of the biases found in the 'official' strike reports we get from the local and the company."



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