

SEP presidential candidate discusses strike with Pittsburgh Verizon workers

Our reporters
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Jerry White, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for president of the United States, held a discussion with striking Verizon workers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania Friday in the first campaign stop after the SEP announced its participation in the US elections.

Striking workers picketing Verizon business locations in downtown Pittsburgh expressed surprise about the entry of a new candidate in the elections.

White said the candidates from the Democratic and Republican Parties had nothing to offer workers except austerity, inequality and war, and that he and his running mate, Niles Niemuth, were fighting to provide the working class with a political program to defend its interests.

The workers readily took copies of the SEP election statement. Despite the steady rain, the picketers and the candidate engaged in a serious discussion about the strike and a broad range of political issues, from the nature of the unions and the Democratic Party to economic nationalism and the danger of war.

Nearly 40,000 workers struck the giant telecom company on April 13 after working without a contract for more than eight months. The company clearly provoked the walkout and used the delay after the August 2015 contract expiration to train an estimated 20,000 managers and contractors as strikebreakers. The Fortune 500 company—and the powerful financial concerns behind it—want to impose deep health care and pension cuts and have a free hand to transfer workers across long distances for weeks or months at a time in order to avoid hiring.

Asked by the candidate what the strike was about, a veteran worker with 22 years picketing a Verizon Wireless store said, "It's about greed. They say the wireline business, which is where we work, is *only* making \$37 billion, while the wireless division, which

is non-union, is making much more. But the wireline pays for the wireless division. They take the money out of us for their lobbying campaigns and their private jets, then they tell their customers they have to raise their rates."

"This is all about job security," another worker with 19 years at the company said. "The average worker is getting nothing, while the top 1 percent gets everything. But if they cut us out, who is going to pay the taxes for the bridges and the other infrastructure we need?"

White responded, saying that Verizon was only one of many corporations that are hoarding vast profits and investing, not in infrastructure, but in stock buybacks and dividends that only benefit their richest investors. At the same time, he added, the government had cut infrastructure by 75 percent in real terms since the 1970s. "Look at Flint where the population is being poisoned," White said, as workers nodded their heads.

"In my view," one of the workers responded, "the way the rich look at it, they are thinning the herd." Michigan's governor, he said, "only cares about profits, and people are dying."

At another picket line, White and several strikers discussed the SEP's call for an international strategy for the working class to oppose the globally organized transnational companies and the growing danger of war.

"To me the biggest issue is outsourcing jobs to other countries," said one veteran worker. "Verizon wants to take jobs to the Philippines, and we have to defend our jobs here."

White said Verizon was a global company, which became the biggest wireless provider in the US after buying Vodafone, a telecom based in the United Kingdom. "The transnational companies pit workers from different countries against each other in a struggle

to see who is going to work for the cheapest wages.” Because the Communications Workers of America and other unions are nationalist, White said, they had no answer to globalization except to try to entice companies to keep production in the US by slashing the wages and benefits of American workers.

White recalled when he first came to Pittsburgh during the 1981 coal miners strike. “I was shocked to see a ‘for sale’ sign on the side of a massive steel mill that had been closed. The United Steelworkers [USW] were engaged in the most disgusting anti-Japanese agitation at the time,” White said, distributing bumper stickers like, “Remember Pearl Harbor.” The USW peddled this nationalist poison, White said, to cover up its collaboration with the steel bosses as they shut down mill after mill and destroyed the gains won by generations of workers.

The promotion of nationalism, whether by the unions, Donald Trump or Bernie Sanders, White added, also created the political climate for war. It was clear from the reaction of workers that there was no support for more wars, which White said would be used to determine which gang of transnational companies would rule the world.

“I’m concerned about the next generation,” a younger worker with nine years at Verizon said. “My daughter and kids have no hope for good jobs. They are coming out of school with tons of college debt. My wife paid \$90,000 for a Masters degree in business and cannot find a job. Now she’s going to medical school. What’s the future generation to do?”

“We are out here fighting to secure a future for our families. But I agree with you, we can’t just do this at the national level. All the different governments are looking out for themselves and trying to get rich.”

Responding to White’s criticism of the CWA’s isolation of the strike and his explanation about the transformation of the unions into tools of management, the worker said, “I read an article about the rally by Verizon workers at Silver Spring, Maryland. I think it was on Yahoo News, where a worker said everyone should go out on strike together in order to fight the attacks of the corporations and the government.”

White pointed out that the article had actually been published by the *World Socialist Web Site* and circulated in the *WSWS Verizon Strike Newsletter*. He showed the worker the quote from a New York City

school bus driver saying, “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.”

“Yeah, that’s the article I read,” the worker said before giving his email to subscribe to the *WSWS Newsletter*.

Reporters from the *Newsletter* also spoke to striking workers in Brooklyn, New York Friday. Nicole, a dispatcher with 17 years of experience, said, “Since the main issue is outsourcing, it is the politicians that have a lot of control over this. This is not just an issue with Verizon, but it is a large concern. You look at Nike or Adidas making things in China, and you see workers over there striking because they aren’t being treated well. I want to live well and get what I earned, and so do people in the Philippines, Mexico and China.

“This is not a fight for us, or even a fight for union workers. We are out here fighting for everyone.”



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