

Strike of 39,000 Verizon workers nearing end of second week

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Nearly 40,000 communication workers are nearing the end of the second week of their strike against telecommunications giant Verizon.

Verizon is sticking to its demands for massive concessions from the workers, particularly cuts to health care and pensions, while at the same time insisting on contract changes that would lead to the loss of thousands of jobs.

Verizon is demanding that it be allowed to close its call centers and open up several mega-centers in states outside the Verizon footprint, staffing them with non-union workers. Verizon is also seeking changes in contract language that would allow the company to reassign workers to work locations up to 100 miles from their current job. The effect would be to add up to four hours or more of commuting time to a worker's day, which is already often 10 and 12 hours long.

The company is also demanding the ability to force workers to report anywhere for up to two months at a time.

The effect of these demands would be to eliminate thousands of jobs and turn those who are still employed by the company into semi-contract laborers forced to go wherever the company wants them to go at a moment's notice.

Verizon is one of the world's largest telecommunications companies, valued at over \$300 billion, and is reporting record profits. Last year, the company made nearly \$18 billion on \$130 billion in revenue. Since the beginning of this year, the company has reported \$1.8 billion in profits per month.

Workers at Verizon are fighting not only the company, but also the unions, which function as a second level of management and have a long history of collaboration with the company at the expense of the workers.

Since the founding of Verizon in 2001, as a merger of the former Bell Atlantic, NYNEX and GTE, the

Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) have worked with the company to cut 48,000 jobs, or over 55 percent of the workforce.

Since the contract expired last August, the CWA and IBEW have forced workers to work without a contract, isolating them from both other communications workers and the working class as a whole. This has given the company ample time to train and put in place its strikebreaking operations. Thousands of AT&T workers at the company's West Coast division are currently being ordered to work without a contract.

The WSWWS spoke with striking Verizon workers on the picket lines throughout the region:

The downtown Brooklyn center of Verizon is a focus of much picketing and rallies because many workers have been transferred there as other centers were closed down. The WSWWS interviewed pickets there on Friday.

A WSWWS *Verizon Strike Newsletter* reporter spoke to the husband of a Verizon worker on the picket. Gary, who works mixing resins in a small paint company of forty people, said he was there because "we need to make sure they don't cut the pensions and set back workers. They should make it easier for workers. For the hard work they do, workers need to be rewarded. Not just peanuts when the company is taking the whole thing. Workers need recognition. Big corporations are selfish."

Gary's wife Toni, who has worked 27 years at Verizon, is a technician who helps build networks. She said, "This is going to be a hard battle. But if we do this correctly, we will keep what we have. We just do not want them to be outsourcing jobs. Job security! That is the big one. Jobs being created are not living wage jobs. Another thing—how does the corporation get more loopholes where they don't pay taxes? From 2008 to 2011, Verizon did not pay taxes.

Linda told the WSWWS, "Winning for me would mean

keeping what we have, not increasing the cost of medical. The company made large profits. They are doing what other companies are doing.”

Kerry Ann Reid, a technician for Verizon Business, has worked there for 15 years. “We are making sacrifices here and hoping that it will pay off,” she said. “We are doing this not only for the current generation of workers but for future generations. We are not here to be able to buy the newest car but to be able to bring up our kids. To pay for housing in New York City is crazy. Inflation has taken over.

“All the workers have to stand up, raising our voices to be heard. We can’t expect change overnight. But if we keep giving back and giving back, we are never going to get them back.”

The WSWs *Verizon Strike Newsletter* also spoke with Verizon workers on strike in Syracuse Thursday. This particular Verizon location has approximately 600 workers, half of whom have been hired after 2003, and many after the 2011 strike.

Workers said that they were aware of a letter sent by the company asking workers to cross the picket line. A 27-year veteran with the company said, “The largest issue for many of us is job security, but health care and retirement are up on the list as well.”

On the issue of pensions, one worker with two years at Verizon said, “I don’t have a pension at all. What they have for those recently hired like me is a 401(k) with a six percent match from the company. I think it was something that only happened since the last contract.”

At the Verizon office in downtown Syracuse, workers explained why they are on strike: One worker explained, “One of the reasons we’re out here is that the company wants the ability to outsource many of these calls to overseas workers who would likely be fired if they even thought about organizing a union.”

Another worker pointed out, “That’s all they’ve been doing is laying off and laying off. If we didn’t go out on strike, then the company would have held off on giving us a new contract for years and years.”

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, John, a customer service worker with five years at Verizon, said, “To me the most important issue is health care. I need it. I need it a lot. My wife’s pretty ill. We’ve got to go the hospital a lot. Second would be the pension, we don’t want to lose our pensions. And naturally the jobs. They’re taking away our jobs, and they’re going to new subcontractors. That means a cut here for other people. It could be me too.

“Nothing is moving [in contract negotiations]. There’s

no progress being made whatsoever on any matter. I think it was time to strike. Naturally, it hurts me, not working, no money coming in, but if it helps in the long run, I’m all for it.

“After the first strike [in 2011], Hurricane Sandy hit, and we were slammed. We were pretty much forced to work twelve, fourteen-hour days, right when we got back.

“I wanted to stay out then. We waited a little bit also, and nothing was happening, so we decided to go on strike. Then they [the unions] sent us back after two weeks with, ‘We’ll work and negotiate.’ I knew that was a failure.”

In northern Virginia, Abdul, a worker with 16 years at Verizon, told the *Newsletter* that public support has greatly increased for the workers in the current strike. “We get a lot of people honking car horns at us, a lot of empathy.

“After 2008, I know many wealthy people who didn’t consider the 2008 crisis to have much of a [financial] impact at all. Look at [Verizon CEO] Lowell McAdam. He makes \$30 million in a year. Even the inflated claims the company sends out that declare that the average worker here makes upwards of \$130,000 per year wouldn’t match his compensation for a single year, even if we were here for a lifetime with that wage. What does he do? He came down to a picket line in New York City a few days ago and was absolutely clueless about our job conditions.”

Abdul said that the company’s current focus was on boosting the value of its stock holdings at the expense of both workers and customers. “Right now, the company is taking loans out not to expand its operations, but to buy back stock.”



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