

Verizon strikers in New York City give warm welcome to SEP presidential candidate

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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) presidential candidate Jerry White and campaign supporters visited several picket lines in Manhattan and Queens, New York on Sunday, discussing with workers the issues at stake in their battle with the giant telecom company.

The five boroughs of New York City are home to nearly 9,000 out of 39,000 Verizon workers who struck company operations throughout the northeast and mid-Atlantic states on April 13. Verizon workers expressed their determination to resist Verizon's attacks on their pension and health benefits, and its efforts to transform the workforce into low-paid and largely casual laborers with few or no rights. As one striker in Astoria, Queens put it, "they want to turn the clock back to the Stone Age."

The determination of the Verizon strikers, who are engaged in the largest strike in the United States in years, stands in sharp contrast to the treachery of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), who have sought to isolate the strike and leave the workers at the mercy of management's strikebreaking operations.

White discussed the need for rank-and-file workers to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the CWA and the IBEW, and break the isolation of their strike by reaching out to the broadest sections of workers throughout New York City. Verizon, he said, was a powerful, transnational corporation that enjoyed the full backing of both big business parties. Its attacks could only be repelled, White said, by mobilizing the full industrial and political strength of the working class in the US and internationally.

Instead the CWA and IBEW have promoted one Democratic Party politician after another, from Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton to Governor Andrew

Cuomo and Bill de Blasio. Workers nodded their heads in agreement when White said the Democrats, no less than the Republicans, were the party of Wall Street, inequality and war.

The real attitude of the Democrats to the strikers was highlighted by the dispatch of hundreds of police officers by Mayor Bill de Blasio to escort scabs around the city, and the setting up of metal barricades to cordon off picketers and support Verizon's strikebreaking operations.

"If you go to England they're fighting in the streets. We can't even curse at the scabs," a striker commented to the WSWs team. "We're in corrals, they're corralling us," he said.

A striker reported that at least one worker has already been fired for "hate speech," under rules sanctioned by the union, which allow Verizon to fire workers for alleged "strike misconduct."

The main concern of both the Democrats and their allies in the trade union bureaucracy is that the Verizon strike could encourage a broader movement of the working class, particularly in New York City, where social tensions are reaching a boiling point. The city of eight million is the capital of social inequality in the United States. Seventy-nine billionaires live in the city, according to Forbes, holding a combined \$364.6 billion in wealth.

"It feel more and more like the time of Marie Antoinette," one worker said, "it's the time to storm the Bastille." Several other workers, without prompting, said America was heading to a revolution. "You have a hard road to fight," a worker at the garage on 47th Street said to White. "It might not be the time right now for straight socialism, but it is coming soon."

The super-rich have literally ruined the city, driving up rents to impossible levels and forcing large numbers

of working class and lower-middle class families to move ever further away in order to afford a living space. At the same time there are millions of workers and young people from all corners of the world looking for a way to fight this inequality.

“You feel insulted constantly as a worker in this city. Take this new \$7 commuter tax, just to drive into Manhattan. The message is obvious: workers are supposed to slave away here during their shift, then get the hell out,” a picketer said.

“We have decent pay, but that’s only because of all the times we’ve been out on strike and what generations of workers before us fought for. They’ve been attacking us, the workers, for a long time. I’m hopeful that what we’re seeing here is the beginning of a new fight back.”

The unions are opposed to any struggle to mobilize these allies of the Verizon workers. In a tactic clearly designed to atomize and demoralize the strikers, the CWA has ordered its members to man tiny, dispersed pickets, positioned in front of Verizon outlets, where they are supposed to discourage shoppers from entering the stores.

“Why should we stop people from getting their phones fixed?” a worker asked the SEP campaigner, mocking the CWA’s pseudo-boycott stunt.

While speaking to the SEP candidate, workers expressed a growing readiness to discuss a genuine socialist strategy, including the need to break with the Democratic Party and build a mass political movement of the working class against capitalism.

In the course of the discussions, White and the SEP emphasized that the promotion of economic nationalism by the unions and the presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders was aimed at encouraging divisions among workers and blocking an international struggle against the transnational corporations, including Verizon. White warned that this was aimed at duping workers into supporting war.

“No one who works sees other workers as the problem. We know it’s the one percent at the top that’s causing the trouble,” a worker replied in agreement.

Another worker added, “They try to blame the Republicans for us losing our jobs, but it’s running thin with more and more of us. It’s becoming clearer every day that the Democrats and the unions have nothing to offer and are on board with the attacks against workers.

I think it’s time for a third party. Maybe Bernie is paving the way.”

White explained that Sanders was trying to channel opposition back within the Democratic Party, and even if he took the unlikely decision to run as independent he would defend the capitalist system and impose austerity and war on workers.

White explained that the SEP is calling for a workers’ government to transform the major corporations into publicly owned, democratically run utilities, operated on the basis of production for human needs.

“It’s a crazy situation developing in this society,” another worker said. “People have had enough. A revolution is coming—I believe it. The system is entirely screwed up. People are recognizing that something has gone badly wrong.” Another Verizon worker added, “You’ve got graduates with advanced degrees working at Starbucks.”



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