

Unions provide platform for Democrats at Verizon strike rallies

Our reporters
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Hundreds of Verizon workers held a protest Monday outside the New Jersey state capitol in Trenton as the strike by 39,000 telecommunications workers heads into its second week. The same day, scores of Verizon workers rallied in Binghamton, New York and several hundred rallied in lower Manhattan.

Verizon strikers walked out over management demands for significant cuts to health care and pensions, as well as changes to contract language regarding outsourcing that would lead to the loss of thousands of jobs. The walkout has been met with strikebreaking by management, which is continuing operations with managers and replacement workers.

The Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) called rallies Monday as part of their effort to channel worker anger behind the Democrats. At the Trenton event, the platform was turned over to Democratic politicians, including New Jersey Assembly Speaker Vince Prieto, who demagogically pledged support to strikers. Meanwhile, New Jersey Senate President Steve Sweeney said in a statement that “we are standing in solidarity with them in their fight for fairness.”

The fact is that Democratic and Republican politicians in New Jersey are joining together to attack public workers. In face of a budgetary crisis in Atlantic City, Sweeney is sponsoring a bill that could lead to unilaterally reopening the contracts of public workers by allowing the state to take over the city’s finances.

In Binghamton, strikers protested Monday outside company headquarters on Henry Street. The platform was also opened to local Democratic politicians. Speaking to reporters at the rally, CWA Local 1111 President Jay Lake noted that management has threatened to cut off health insurance benefits for all striking workers effective May 1, but offered no strategy to oppose this attack.

Another rally in lower Manhattan drew a reported attendance of 250. New York Democratic Mayor Bill De Blasio has used the city’s police department as a strikebreaking force, keeping picketing workers behind barricades while replacement workers maintain company operations.

A Verizon worker told the *World Socialist Web Site Verizon Strike Newsletter* that he had learned from an informed source that a major sticking point in the negotiations revolved around a company plan to offer a monetary incentive to older workers to retire. The company is advancing a plan to waive the penalty for older workers who may be just short of qualifying for full retirement benefits based on their age and years of service.

While the offer would be attractive to older workers, the unions are opposed to the proposal on the grounds that they would lose too many dues-paying members if the deal were implemented.

Since calling the walkout, the CWA and IBEW have blocked any broader mobilization of the working class behind the Verizon strikers. For example, thousands of workers at US West are being told by the CWA to continue working without a contract.

At Verizon, the CWA and IBEW kept workers on the job without a contract for months, while management prepared its strikebreaking operation. The strike was called with little or no preparation, timed to coincide with the New York Democratic primary.

The unions are refusing to offer any strike pay to pickets, leaving workers to rely on their own financial resources. Workers indicated to the *Newsletter* that they are becoming increasingly frustrated and angry over the lack of information from the unions and the absence of any strategy to win the strike.

Verizon, meanwhile, is continuing to divest of its landline operations as it focuses on its predominantly non-

union wireless operations. On April 1, just prior to the strike, Verizon sold local landline operations in Florida, California and Texas to Frontier communications for \$10.5 billion. The business included some 3.3 million voice connections and 2.1 million broadband connections.

A striking Verizon worker in Northern Virginia told the *Newsletter*, “The union is deciding things behind closed doors, which is BS. I don’t know what they are doing. Most guys are not getting any strike pay. If their local union doesn’t take up a fund collection, they will get nothing.

“Some guys have been forced to get a second job because they have bills to pay and there is no money being on strike.”

The demands of management appear aimed at driving out older workers in order to replace them with lower paid new hires. The company is seeking contract language changes that would allow it to reassign workers up to 100 miles away from their current work locations. It is also demanding the right to force workers to report anywhere for up to two months at a time.

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Joe, a worker with eighteen years, explained what is at stake in the strike: “Our benefits, healthcare, outsourcing. They want to cut our tuition benefits. Right now we get \$8,000 a year toward our tuition. Basically, anything good they want to take away.”

Speaking of the 2011 strike Joe noted, “We gave up things maybe if we had waited for a couple of storms, the company would have given in, instead of the union. I think the union gave up a lot.

“Verizon has a lot of connections with the media. All of the media reports have been basically portraying the workers as greedy, and the company as realistic. They’re saying we get a 6.5 percent raise, but they don’t say that it’s over three years. That’s just about a cost-of-living increase.”

Another worker said, “We don’t see any need to make concessions for a company making this much money.”



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