

# **Verizon workers discuss strike with SEP presidential candidate Jerry White**

**Our reporters**  
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After a successful campaign meeting the night before at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Jerry White completed a weeklong trip to Pennsylvania, New York and Massachusetts by visiting striking Verizon workers in Boston on Tuesday.

Of the nearly 40,000 workers involved in the two-week strike, about 5,000 are in Massachusetts. About 50 picketers marched in front of the Verizon Building in Bowdoin Square, which still carries the name “New England Telephone and Telegraph Company” above the entrance. Verizon New England, which sold off its Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont operations to FairPoint Communications in 2008, covers all of Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

In a provocative move designed to starve workers into submission, the telecom giant is cutting off medical insurance to strikers and their families on Saturday, April 30. The company has remained steadfast in its demands that workers accept deep cuts in health and pension benefits, wage increases that barely keep up with the rate of inflation, and new “flexible” work assignments. The latter includes the arbitrary transfer of workers to distant locations for weeks or months at a time, a move that is designed to force older, higher paid workers to leave the industry.

After weeks of fruitless negotiations, talks will reportedly resume today. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) and the Communications Workers of America (CWA), which represent the majority of striking workers, have already offered hundreds of millions of dollars in concessions. This reportedly includes an offer to allow the company to push retirees into a Medicare supplement plan that would provide inferior coverage and force them to pay higher out-of-pocket expenses.

In previous visits to picket lines in Pittsburgh and New York City, White explained the need to mobilize the entire strength of the working class to defeat the government-backed attack on Verizon workers. He encouraged rank-and-file workers to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the unions, which have deliberately isolated the Verizon strikers.

The AFL-CIO and Change to Win union federations, which are allied with the Obama administration and focused on the reelection of a Democrat to the White House, do not want the Verizon strike to encourage a broader movement of the working class against the spread of low-wage employment, which has been at the center of Obama’s so-called economic recovery.

On Wednesday, the United Steelworkers announced it had reached an agreement with the giant steelmaker ArcelorMittal, after the union forced 13,000 workers to labor more than eight months without a contract. It follows the imposition by the union of a sellout agreement at ATI Technologies that imposed deep concessions.

The CWA has ordered 9,400 AT&T West workers to continue working without a contract, along with hundreds of CWA members at AT&T East in Connecticut. In 2014, the IBEW betrayed the four-month strike by 1,700 FairPoint workers (See adjoining article: ) and accepted sweeping cuts in health care and retiree benefits.

Veterans of the 2011 Verizon strike, which was called off after two weeks without a contract, are suspicious that the CWA and IBEW may do the same in the current struggle, motivated primarily by a desire by the union bureaucracy not to significantly deplete its multi-million dollar strike funds.

As SEP candidate Jerry White and a SEP supporter approached picketers in downtown Boston there was an

audible murmur of anger, as workers initially thought another strikebreaker was about to cross their lines. A mini cheer went up when White, who was approached by security guard to escort him into the building, announced he was not a strikebreaker but had come to express his solidarity with striking workers and discuss the political issues in their struggle. The Socialist Equality Party candidate then explained the aim of his candidacy as he walked with strikers who, in turn, outlined the issues in their struggle.

Dave, a striker with 16 years, said, “A lot of my family works here and my dad is a retired Teamster and they are trying to take his pension from him. It’s crazy, it’s happening all over.

“In 1999 there was a terrible ice storm in Maine and residents were without phone services for days. We did not mind traveling long distances and working long hours to help people in a disaster. But Verizon wants to do that on a general basis. They don’t care that people have a life outside of here.”

The worker said that Verizon and other telecom companies were using revolutionary advances in technology not to improve the lives of workers or customers “but to increase their productivity and profits by wiping out jobs.” White said Verizon and other giant corporations should be transformed into publicly owned utilities under the control of the working class, so technology could be used to benefit the working class not further enrich top executives and wealthy investors.

Dave responded, “It should be fair and equal for all but they want to keep it all for themselves.”

He said that none of the politicians in the elections appealed to him and expressed concern, saying “everybody loses in these wars,” when White explained the plans, shared by all of the Democratic and Republican candidates, to expand war after the elections.

White explained that the Socialist Equality Party was fighting to mobilize the working class to back the Verizon workers, noting that tens of millions of workers in the US, from autoworkers to teachers, were facing similar attacks on their jobs, health care and pension benefits. He said that transnational corporations like Verizon had a global strategy and that workers had to unite their forces around the world to defend the right of all workers to good-paying and

secure jobs, health care and a decent retirement.

“What’s happening here is going to set the precedent for all workers,” said Ann, a veteran worker. “If we don’t stop what Verizon is doing big corporations are going to do this to workers all over the world. This is the largest strike in years.

“It’s not that workers are opposed to technological change, the question is how that change is carried out. The corporate executives are not working overtime, taking calls from angry customers asking why their service hasn’t been restored for days. You have to try to do anything to help them knowing that you’ve already put four or five calls in to get their issues resolved.”

Relating the stress levels on the job to recent reports on the decline in life expectancy, particularly among white working-class women, Ann said, “I just heard a story on women with families who are forced to do shift work, and that they had suffered a 35 percent increase in heart disease. The long and irregular hours mess up your life, your body and your biological clock.”

Jim, another veteran worker, said he was a Sanders supporter because both parties were controlled by big business. When White said that Sanders had pledged to back Hillary Clinton and the Democrats if she won the primaries, Jim said, “We have a two-party system. The only alternative to that is revolution.”



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