

International Socialist Organization covers for union treachery in Verizon strike

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An article on the Verizon strike published April 21 on the web site of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), “A rising sea of red against Verizon,” is a crude effort to provide a “left” cover for the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) and disarm the strikers and workers more generally in the face of the unions’ treachery.

The ISO, by promoting the union bureaucracy and concealing the political issues posed by the Verizon workers’ struggle, serves as an accomplice in the efforts to isolate the strike and impose new concessions in pensions, health benefits and working conditions. The ISO opposes any movement by the workers to break free of the narrow constraints imposed on the strike by the unions and broaden the struggle to involve other sections of workers both in the US and internationally. This is under conditions where the US election campaign has revealed a growth of militancy and anti-capitalist sentiment among broad layers of workers and youth.

The article by Mark Friedman and Ruth Hurley falsely depicts the union leadership as being locked in an intransigent struggle against the telecommunications giant in defense of the jobs and living standards of the strikers and the working class as a whole. The authors equate the selfish institutional interests of the union bureaucracy with the interests of the workers, omitting or distorting the actual record of the unions’ treachery. They solidarize themselves with the unions’ corporatist, nationalist and pro-Democratic Party politics.

“The CWA and IBEW are fighting to uphold a set of standards for compensation, job security and workplace dignity that the rest of the labor movement can rally behind,” they write. The claim that the union apparatus

is fighting for “compensation, job security and workplace dignity” is patently false.

While the strikers are determined to oppose company demands for new cuts in health benefits and pensions as well as the potential loss of thousands of jobs through outsourcing, the sole concern of the unions in the Verizon strike is to expand their dues base, which has fallen significantly since the company began shifting the axis of its business to its wireless division, which is nonunion. That is why the union leadership has focused almost entirely on the demand that Verizon expand its fiber optic FiOS operations, which are part of the company’s unionized wireline operations.

The unions are prepared to offer up as bargaining chips the pensions, health benefits and working conditions of rank-and-file workers in their horse-trading with the company over FiOS. They have already offered Verizon \$200 million in concessions.

The authors solidarize themselves with this policy when they write that the central question in the strike is whether “the union—now down to 11 percent of the total company—[can] maintain relevance.” They attempt to provide this corporatist policy with a “left” gloss by introducing identity politics, writing, “Verizon has flatly refused to deliver its service in some areas, many of which are predominantly Black and Brown.”

They say nothing about the unions’ deliberate isolation of the strike. They are silent on the CWA’s refusal to call out 16,000 AT&T workers on the west coast whose contract expired on April 9. Nor do they mention the fact that the Verizon workers were ordered to remain on the job for a full eight months after their previous contract expired, providing the company with ample time to train tens of thousands of strikebreakers. The unions have maintained only skeleton picket lines throughout the strike, allowing the company to bring

strikebreakers into its facilities, while diverting the energies of strikers into demonstrations outside of Verizon outlet stores calling for a consumer boycott.

The CWA and IBEW have used the strike as a platform for Democratic Party politicians to make worthless pledges of support.

The strike itself was hastily organized so as to coincide with the Democratic Party primary in New York, and Bernie Sanders was invited to address a CWA rally in Manhattan the day before the primary. The CWA, eager to camouflage its corporatist policies by backing a self-described “socialist” candidate, was one of the first unions to endorse Sanders last year.

The ISO article has nothing critical to say about this. Instead, it hails the appearance of Sanders at the demonstration, declaring that “his high profile at picket lines and union halls has helped cast Verizon as the poster child of the kind of corporate rule that the Sanders’ campaign skewers.” This is in keeping with the ISO’s promotion of Sanders, whose campaign is a calculated effort to channel broad social anger and disgust with the political establishment back into the Democratic Party.

The authors tack on at the end of the article an admission that “With the end of the Democratic primaries in New York and Pennsylvania, the boost of the Sanders campaign will dry up, and it will be up to Verizon workers and their supporters to keep up the pressure.” The authors do not elaborate on this implicit acknowledgement that Sanders’ appearances on the picket line and at demonstrations are nothing more than election stunts.

The article makes only one oblique reference to the outcome of the last Verizon strike, noting in passing that “The last strike at Verizon in 2011 lasted two weeks before the unions went back to work without a contract.”

The sentence is deliberately constructed so as to give the impression that its defeat was the fault of no one in particular. In fact, the unions, having called off the strike without shifting Verizon on any of its concessions demands, more than a year later imposed a sellout agreement that included most of the company’s original takeaway demands. This experience, which is still fresh in the minds of many strikers today and is a source of resentment and hostility towards the union, is glossed over by the ISO because the organization’s

orientation is precisely to the union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party, not the working class.

This basic fact is underscored by the authors’ attempt to present the 2012 Chicago teachers’ strike as a victory for the working class and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) as a model union. Both claims are outright lies, often repeated by the ISO, one of whose members, Jesse Sharkey, is vice president of the union.

The article calls the Chicago teachers’ strike “the most critical strike in the intervening period” after the 2011 Verizon walkout, and describes it as “a model of how unions can fly a flag of social justice and not just fight for bread-and-butter contract issues.” In fact, the CTU called off the strike after only eight days and pushed through a contract that included new attacks on teachers’ job security and working conditions. The sellout of the strike paved the way for the shuttering of 54 public schools by Mayor Rahm Emanuel, a Democrat, the largest mass closure of schools in American history.

Chicago teachers have now been without a contract for close to a year, and the CTU has made clear that it is prepared to forgo any significant wage increase and accept further concessions in a new contract.

Perhaps the most reactionary aspect of the ISO’s defense of the union bureaucracy is its tacit support for the unions’ promotion of economic nationalism and chauvinism. The April 21 article says nothing about the ceaseless efforts of the CWA and IBEW to divert the anger of workers and direct it against Verizon workers in Mexico, the Philippines and other countries. This nationalist policy blocks any united struggle of workers against the company, which operates on a global scale, while setting in motion a fratricidal and self-defeating bidding war between workers in different countries to “save jobs” by working harder, longer and faster for less.



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