

Verizon makes “last, best and final offer” to striking workers

Jerry White
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Verizon Communications handed down its “last, best and final offer” to negotiators from the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) on Thursday. The ultimatum comes as 39,000 workers have entered their third week on strike against the telecom giant, which also plans to cut off medical insurance to strikers and their families on Saturday.

Verizon, which made \$39 billion in profits over the last three years, is standing fast on its demands for “workforce flexibility changes” that would compel workers to travel long distances for temporary work assignments. In the New York City area alone, this would involve transfers of up to 80 miles away from current work locations, which could mean travel times of three hours each way.

This proposal is key to the company’s plans to continue shrinking its workforce, particularly in its wireline division. The changes would allow Verizon to ramp up the exploitation of current workers instead of hiring more employees to install and maintain the company’s landline phones and fiber optic cables. Moreover, the stress on workers’ health and family lives, the company hopes, would lead to an exodus of older, higher-paid workers. What few new workers were hired into the division would have no employer-paid pensions and would essentially be low-paid casual laborers.

In line with this strategy, the company is offering lump sums and cash incentives for “voluntary retirements” to further reduce its payroll. Since 2000, the number of workers covered by the CWA and IBEW has fallen by nearly half.

Verizon is also offering a derisory 7.5 percent wage increase over three years, which barely keeps up with the rate of inflation. Meanwhile, it wants workers to

pay higher out-of-pocket health care costs to maintain their current plans, or alternately to accept inferior health care coverage. The latter is in line with Obama’s Cadillac Tax on supposedly overgenerous benefits, which has been used to shift health costs from the corporations onto the backs of workers.

Well aware of the rank-and-file anger over the union’s sellout of the 2011 strike, CWA officials responded to the offer with theatrical bluster, denouncing Verizon even though the unions have already offered an estimated \$200 million in concessions.

In a text message sent to workers in New York City, where nearly a quarter of the striking Verizon workers reside, a CWA Local 1101 official wrote: “The greedy company we work for offered the same contract we left on the table last time. Our bargaining team told them to go f... themselves. Don’t believe their lies. They are going to fedex us all their last & final offer. We ask all members to bring the fedex pkg in so we can burn them en masse.”

Another text from the CWA said, “Our members need to be aware bargaining is not over. In a couple of days CWA will meet with the company and reject their proposals and will give the company our proposals.” If members did not return the packages with the final offer, the text instructed local union officials to “collect them unopened and give them to us.”

The immediate reaction of one rank-and-file worker in New York City to the text messages was, “The union clearly doesn’t want us to read the offer.” Another source reported that the CWA is opposed to the retirement incentives because it fears a race to retire by workers would severely undermine union dues revenue.

The CWA and the IBEW have long collaborated in the destruction of jobs and the erosion of wages,

benefits and working conditions that have emboldened the telecommunications giant. The company took full advantage of the unions' decision to force workers to labor eight months without a contract, spending the time training some 20,000 strikebreakers.

The telecom unions, along with the AFL-CIO, have left the striking workers isolated while shunting them from one impotent stunt to another, from photo-ops with Democratic Party candidates to appealing to wireless customers to boycott the company. The CWA has ordered thousands of AT&T workers in California, Nevada and Connecticut to continue working without a contract, blocking a strike by telecom workers on both borders.

Meanwhile, the unions are offering starvation rations for strike pay, even though the CWA sits on a so-called Defense Fund worth hundreds of millions. In some cases, workers expecting to get their first strike benefits of \$200 today have been told by local officials that they don't know when the national organization will release their money. As for helping workers whose health benefits are being ended Saturday, the unions will only provide aid in cases of extreme "emergency," and then only after members subject themselves to degrading inquiries from union committees.

These tactics are aimed at demoralizing workers and starving them into submission and have already led to some workers to cross the picket lines. While its estimates cannot be trusted, Verizon claims more than 1,000 of the striking workers have gone back to work.

With the momentum fully on its side, the company has repeatedly threatened to impose its final offer by May 20 if its demands are not accepted. At the same time, it has provided the unions an opening to accept federal mediation from the Obama administration, which imposed the company's health care concession demands in 2011 after the CWA shut down a two-week strike.

The battle by Verizon workers is at a crossroads. The unions, which are allied with the Obama administration and the Democrats, have led workers to a dead end. A fight is possible, but only if rank-and-file workers take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands and consciously oppose the sabotage by the CWA, IBEW and the rest of the AFL-CIO and Change to Win unions. Workers should elect rank-and-file strike committees to leaflet industrial and public sector

workers in their cities and call for mass demonstrations and other solidarity actions to defend them against this corporate-government onslaught.

A particular appeal should be made to telecom workers around the world, from Spain and Mexico to the Philippines and China, who are engaged in their own struggles against job cutting, privatization and other attacks. Global corporations like Verizon can only be fought through the unity and common struggle of the international working class in opposition to the nationalist poison promoted by the unions and politicians, which only divides and weakens workers.

Workers are, however, not just fighting one particularly greedy employer, but the entire capitalist system, which subordinates the most elemental needs of working people to the ever-greater enrichment of corporate executives and Wall Street investors. Both corporate-controlled parties and the trade unions defend this system.

The struggle to defeat Verizon should be the starting point for a political counteroffensive of the working class whose aim is the fight for a workers' government and the replacement of capitalism with socialism. The giant telecommunication monopolies must be transformed into publicly owned and democratically controlled utilities in order to provide affordable and high-quality services to all.



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