

“This is the turning point for all of us”

Verizon strikers react to company ultimatum

Our reporters
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Striking Verizon workers are reacting strongly to the ultimatum delivered by management Thursday. Company officials declared that the concessionary proposal they handed the union was management’s “last, best and final” offer as the strike by 39,000 workers continues into its third week. Workers also face an April 30 cutoff of health benefits.

The company is determined to continue slashing jobs in its drive to increase productivity and profits. Central to its plans are measures to drive out older, better-paid workers, who would be replaced by new hires with no employer-paid pensions. In particular, management wants to change work rules to force employees to travel long distances to temporary work assignments.

The company is also offering a derisory 7.5 percent wage increase over the next three years, while at the same time forcing workers to pay higher out-of-pocket health care costs or switch to inferior coverage. This is in line with the so-called “Cadillac Tax” included in Obama’s Affordable Health Care Act, which punishes health care plans that are supposedly too generous.

In response to the management ultimatum, the union has offered empty bluster but no way forward for striking workers, continuing its practice of working with management to enforce concessions.

Verizon was well prepared for the walkout, training a small army of management strikebreakers to maintain operations. Meanwhile, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) have kept Verizon workers isolated from other telecommunication workers, including 16,000 AT&T workers on the West Coast whose contract expired on April 9.

Workers contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site Verizon Strike Newsletter* responded angrily to word of the company ultimatum. Daniel, a worker in New York

City who has worked at Verizon for 20 years, said, “The fact that the company can say this is the ‘best and final offer’ is a testament to the state of economic justice in this country. We all know that this contract will impact contracts of other unions in the future. This is the turning point for all of us. You see people driving by and honking their horns. They know we are all brothers in this struggle.”

WSWS reporters also spoke to Verizon pickets at the downtown Brooklyn, New York center. A Verizon worker with 18 years experience said, “We are fighting for a cause. We wouldn’t be out here otherwise. We are fighting for the next generation. The most junior person among us has sixteen years on the job. They have hired temps, but not permanent workers. Through attrition they want to eliminate jobs.”

A call center worker in Flatbush, New York who has been working for 20 years said, “For workers to get what we need, everything has to stop, we all have to stop working. Everyone has the right to have a beautiful house. Instead we have some people with \$50 billion. What can one person do with \$50 billion? Why does one person have \$50 billion? Why?”

Rob, a service tech in Pittsburgh, said, “I haven’t received the offer yet. The company wants to make out that we are greedy and high paid, but they are the ones making one-and-a-half billion a month. I earn a decent living, but if it seems high, it is only because wages have been cut for so many other workers. The companies have been cutting workers my entire life, but we are the ones that make things work. Look at how their profits keep going up while we are staying the same or falling.

“What good is a good paying job if you can’t do it? One hundred miles is a long way. They could tell me I have to work in Altoona one week and report to New

Castle the next. How long could a person last doing that? They don't want to hire permanent employees, so we are way understaffed, and if someone goes on vacation or has a baby they want to force you to go out and do their job and your own.

"All they want is young people who are willing to work like crazy to make some money. But all you can last doing that is a year or two.

"All workers should stick together. We should all unite against the companies. This is a worldwide struggle; everyone just wants to support themselves, take care of their families, see the next generation have something a little better."

The *Newsletter* also spoke to workers on the picket line in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Ashley, Larry, and Lili, all veterans of the last strike, took time to discuss the issues in their struggle.

"My main concern is that they're going to send us into federal mediation again," Larry said, "and we're going to get screwed just like we did five years ago. Everything is going to go the corporation's way in arbitration."

In 2011, the CWA and IBEW called off the strike after only two weeks, without a contract. Federal mediators then imposed concessions along the lines demanded by the company.

Pointing at Lili, Larry said that she by herself made millions for Verizon last year, "and so did all of us.

"I haven't had a raise in five years," he continued. "People say we make a lot of money. But by the time I pay taxes, I'm taking home \$37,000."

The WSWS also spoke with striking Verizon workers in Syracuse this weekend. Some of the key issues that were on the minds of strikers were retirement, health benefits, job security and concern for the next generation of workers.

A veteran wireline repair worker said, "They've been trying to break the union the last three contracts. [Verizon CEO] Lowell McAdam doesn't understand the wireline business, he's from the wireless side of the company. He doesn't understand that 85 percent of your cellphone calls go over wires.

"Lowell is a bottom-line guy, he doesn't care about the network or the people that built and maintain it; he only cares about the shareholders."

All the workers contacted by the WSWS said that any raises that they had received over the duration of the

last contract were offset by the hikes in benefit costs, with one striker saying, "They want to be able to move you when they want so that you are so miserable that you have to quit your job, because it's either that or sell your house and have to move somewhere like New Jersey where the cost of living is much higher. You could sell an average house in Syracuse for \$140,000 and that wouldn't get a shack in New Jersey."



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