

Verizon strike enters fourth week

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Nearly 40,000 communication workers in the US are beginning their fourth week on strike against telecommunications giant Verizon.

Verizon is demanding deep cuts to health care for both active and retired workers along with rule changes which would allow workers to be transferred any where in the company for 60 days. The company also wants the ability to permanently move workers up to 100 miles.

Over 20,000 management and contractors have been trained to fill the jobs of striking workers, and call center calls are being routed to non-union call centers the company had already set up. On Sunday, the company eliminated the health benefits for the 39,000 workers and their families.

In the face of this assault, the Communication Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) are working to isolate the workers and impose a concessions contract.

The WSWWS *Verizon Strike Newsletter* spoke with workers through the Northeast.

“They want to get rid of jobs,” said Brian, a striking worker in Boston. “You might as well just remove my job, because if you wanted me to go work in another state I’d have to quit.”

Last week, the company presented a “last best offer” that contains all of its main demands, including the ability to transfer workers and force them out. “We’re on strike for job security,” Brian said. “If you can’t take that language out, how can they even tell us to go back to work? We lost three weeks of pay, and they didn’t even give us the one thing we’re out here for. Without security, you don’t have a job. I don’t even care what the rest of the contract says.”

Brian said that Verizon was proposing to move entire offices, and not even doing it by seniority. “We don’t want them to have the right to do it office by office,” he

said. “That’s their way of getting rid of an entire office. Also, within that one office, they could say, ‘We want to move you guys out of state.’ So it’s not just getting rid of older people. It’s their way of getting rid of areas that they want, and over the course of three years to get rid of all of us. First it’s in New York, then it’s in New England.

“After the last contract, 38 percent of calls are now going overseas. That’s ridiculous. You open up the door and they’re going to take it all. So we just can’t accept that.”

Brian said that the only reason they haven’t included Boston in some of the movement of work is because of the planned fiber optics [FiOS] build-out in the city. “They’re going to have to hire people,” he said.

“That’s a lot of work; it’s a \$300 million project. That’s going to give people work over the next 10 to 12 years. But they would rather hire contractors, because they wouldn’t have to offer the benefits. And they already have workers that are on a lower tier. They don’t have a pension, they don’t get paid the same. There’s a big difference.”

Marilyn started in 2000 and she’s one of the least senior people in the entire office. “They didn’t hire anybody after me.”

Brian said there were probably a hundred people working inside the Boston location. “My managers are in there. But the people from out of state, I don’t know if they’re managers or contractors.

“And they’re cutting our benefits as of May 1. In the past they’ve always waited 30 days. So 18 days and no health care, nothing. And I’ve got two little kids. I’m not so worried about me, but you never know what can happen with them. COBRA [health benefits] would cost me \$2,200 a month. I don’t even have a paycheck, and now you want \$2,200 a month.”

In New York, Nicole, a dispatcher with 17 years of experience, said, “The main issue with Verizon is the

threat of outsourcing our work. They are also telling us that we are not useful, but it is not true. We are installing and repairing the FiOS cables, and this is one of the company's newer products and it is heavily demanded.

"Before the strike, management was doing what they always do around strike time, and that is cracking down on any little thing. They look for any way to discipline you, check that you are not taking any more time at lunch or being tardy. It is also difficult working without a contract, like we were. You feel like the CEO could lay you off. So, management started asking us to do things outside of our job descriptions. I had to arrange appointments with customers, which is normally not part of my job, but I still had my other work to do.

"Since the main issue is outsourcing, it is the politicians that have a lot of control over this. This is not just an issue with Verizon, but it is a large concern. You look at Nike or Adidas making things in China, and you see workers over there striking because they aren't being treated well. I want to live well and get what I earned, and so do people in the Philippines, Mexico and China.

"This is not a fight for us, or even a fight for union workers. We are out here fighting for everyone."

Barbara, a customer service representative at Verizon for 16 years, said, "When I started working management in a lot of departments was more flexible. We were able to get overtime, and people on the executive level never bothered us. Now the executives are on us all the time.

Asked about a comparison between this strike and the 2011 strike, she added, "In 2011 they weren't prepared for us to go out. Now the company has been preparing for years for us to strike. I get calls from people in the South or in the Philippines, and they are doing work that they weren't supposed to be doing.

"The leadership of the CWA doesn't give out information, and they don't tell send this down the line. We are all here wondering why they decided to call the strike when they did. I want these things communicated to us.

"The CWA offered concessions, but I guess Verizon wanted them in other ways. To me job security is a non-negotiable issue, and I would even be willing to pay more medical for it, but I don't know what the CWA thinks."

In Brooklyn, a Verizon worker with 18 years' experience told the WSWS, "We are fighting for a cause. We couldn'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.

When health care was mentioned as a strike demand, Joseph, who had 26 years experience with Verizon and worked as a customer service representative, remarked, "I never liked Obamacare. It is ruining health care. It is making it harder for working people to get coverage. Some of my friends who are doctors are actually getting hit, too, not getting enough payments." Verizon is citing provisions of Obamacare to demand cuts in health care benefits.

"After we struck several years ago we had to pay for medical and it is going up even more. They are little by little taking it all back. This time they are trying to take it all back.

Another Verizon striker, said about the elections, "If you look at who's supporting Hillary Clinton, you find that she is not a friend to anyone who does not help her pocketbook. She is out for her own interests."



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