

New York Verizon strikers seek to break isolation of struggle

Our reporters
6 May 2016

Some 3,000 Verizon strikers and their supporters marched in downtown Manhattan Thursday as the walkout by 39,000 telecom workers in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states entered its fourth week. While striking workers expressed their determination to oppose the “last, best and final offer,” handed down by Verizon last week, the leaders of the Communications Workers of America and other unions offered no way forward for the struggle.

Top CWA officials, including national president Chris Shelton and vice-president Dennis Trainor, decried “corporate greed” and continued their nationalist rants against Mexican and Filipino telecom workers. They repeated the empty slogan of “One day longer, one day stronger,” making it clear that nothing would be done to break the isolation of the struggle despite the massive strikebreaking operation by the Fortune 500 corporation.

Various other union bureaucrats from American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees District Council 37, the Service Employees International Union and the New York Hotel Trades Council added their empty sloganeering even as they do everything to block any unified struggle of New York City workers against the government-backed assault on workers. As usual, they told workers to place their faith in the Democrats, who are no less enemies of workers than the Republicans.

What was billed as a “march on Wall Street” turned out to be a demonstration through the secluded residential districts of lower Manhattan that explicitly avoided the New York Stock Exchange and finished at the CWA District 1 headquarters.

Among striking workers there is a growing mood of frustration with the endless routine of toothless protests and publicity stunts while they have been kept in the

dark about ongoing negotiations. The CWA has already offered millions in concessions.

A Verizon striker who describes herself as a special representative for business customers told the WSWS *Verizon Strike Newsletter*, “We don’t know what is going on with the negotiations. The spokesman for the Verizon CEO and the union say one thing and then the CEO says what they said is not accurate.

“I have been on strike a number of times, the longest one being in ‘89, which lasted for four months. It is not a coincidence that the union called the strike to coincide with the Democratic Party primaries. Both Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton came to picket lines that week and got a lot of media coverage. The politicians need the money from the companies and the votes from the workers.”

Another Verizon worker said, “While the company has been making a lot of money, they don’t want to give any decent raises. When they were putting in FiOS (fiber optic system), they asked us to take a cut in pay, and then afterwards we would get a share of the profits.

“They want to increase the number of miles away that they want to be able to send us from the current 35 to 80. I remember when I used to work on 38th Street in Manhattan, and the company decided to place us all in Massapequa, Long Island. They not only moved us to Long Island, they also eliminated our travel pay. We not only spent more time traveling back and forth to Long Island, we also lost money, but it saved them money.

“A number of workers took an early retirement rather than make that move. Some of them had only worked for 10-15 years so they could not get any money right away. Verizon wants to pressure older people with more benefits to leave. They want to replace them with the younger people with less benefits.

“We want to know what the union and management are negotiating. Once you start to pay for health benefits, the company wants more. I now pay \$30 a week for health insurance. It is the history of the union to make concessions, that’s why we’re paying for medical care. I voted against the last contract. A lot of people voted for it because they are under pressure to pay bills.

“Most of the people I know on this job have been working here for more than 25 years. They have kids that are back home with them because their children can’t find jobs.

Expressing the growing anti-capitalist sentiment in the working class, the striker said, “People are taught that with socialism, someone like the government takes their money. In reality it is this government that takes our money to pay for bombs and the military. They lie about socialism. The system is run by money so they tell you socialism is bad.”

Strikers at the Downtown Brooklyn Verizon Center also spoke with the *WSWS Verizon Strike Newsletter*. Rose began working for Verizon in 1971, the year 400,000 CWA workers waged a national strike that won cost-of-living protection and other benefits.

“I can’t retire and afford to live in New York City, in Brooklyn, on a pension until I get Social Security, too. I have had one job but worked through four names of this company: New York Telephone, NYNEX, Bell Atlantic and now Verizon.

“I started on a Tuesday and the next Wednesday in 1971 they went on strike. The company was coast to coast. It went on nationally for a month and then seemed to end and we had a big party, not realizing that for New York Telephone the strike would go on another six months

“In 1971, working for telephone and the post office, which also went on strike, were the best jobs for pay and benefits but yet they had to have a national strike to get what we deserved. Since then the cost of living kept going up. We have not kept up and we have to strike. Since 1990 I have not seen the unions try to fight and be united.”

Asked how she saw the struggle being taken forward, Rose responded, “Last August, because the strike was supposed to be last year when the contract ended, a few workers proposed sending people to organize in the Philippines. The union shot down that idea. Then they

spent ten months negotiating. Then they told us at the last minute we were going out on strike, when we had not prepared.”

As for the political situation workers faced, Rose stated, “The Democrats are no different from the Republicans. I used to see Mayor de Blasio around my neighborhood when he was an assemblyman. De Blasio is like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. He became another Bloomberg. Hillary? They are all the same. You can’t trust any of them. Trump is a bully. He was just some rich guy’s kid. Who thought he would get this power? Sanders is like anybody, saying what people want to hear. This election year, no matter who wins, we are going to lose.”

Ernestine, who has worked for 35 years at Verizon, said, “We are working like in a concentration camp, to be honest. They suspend you for absolutely nothing. They harass you. If you leave three minutes early, you will be suspended for three days. We have one manager who suspended fifteen to twenty people, for nonsense. They are harassing workers, just so then can climb the corporate ladder because Verizon is also getting rid of managers every three months to cut costs. Managers are kept on pins and needles so they come after us.”

Gary is a technician testing circuits and has 37 years experience. “We have many issues but a major one is job security. Verizon also wants to increase our share for medical. The companies never want to compromise. Meanwhile their CEO salaries keep going up. New workers are not going to get what older workers got. They don’t want to give them a pension. The unions say they support each other at rallies. It doesn’t seem to be working. Anyway there is always hierarchy and leaders at the top.”

Referring to the growing opposition of workers throughout the country another striker, Barbara, said, “I support Detroit teachers. How are people expected to work and not get paid? But they are isolated, like we are. It should be workers supporting each other.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact