

“Workers in the Philippines and Mexico are not our enemies”

New York Verizon striker explains need for international strategy

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The strike by nearly 40,000 workers against Verizon Communications will reach the one-month mark at the end of this week with the giant corporation showing no signs of pulling back from its demands for sweeping concessions in wages, benefits and work conditions.

While workers have demonstrated their determination to defend past gains, the strike has settled into the pattern of countless workers' struggles over the last 35 years, which were isolated and betrayed by the unions. The Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) and the trade union federations that oversee them have opposed any broader mobilization of the working class that would upset their decades-long “partnership” with the employers and the Democratic Party.

If the Verizon strike is not to suffer the same fate, rank-and-file workers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands and wage the fight based on an entirely different political strategy.

The following is a comment from a striking Verizon worker in New York City who is a veteran of the 1989 NYNEX strike and the 2000 and 2011 strikes at Verizon. A supporter of the World Socialist Web Site and the WSWs Verizon Strike Newsletter, the worker explains the global character of the telecommunications industry and why workers need an international strategy to defend their jobs and living standards.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has been reporting, the primary issues in our strike are pensions, increased health care costs, and Verizon's demand to arbitrarily shift an employee's work location over an extensive geographic area, a move many believe is designed to force older workers to retire so the company can hire lower-paid workers without pensions. In another effort to slash jobs, the company wants to route service and technical calls to centers in Mexico and the Philippines.

The CWA has seized upon the last demand to promote hostility to workers in other countries and reinforce the false

claim that US workers can defend our jobs without adopting an international strategy to fight the global telecom giants.

The absurdity of such an outlook is seen by an examination of the global character of Verizon. It is the primary provider of basic phone service and a major provider of cable TV and Internet access in the major population and business centers along the eastern seaboard of the United States. But that is not all.

In every respect, Verizon is a global corporation. The company has 177,900 employees worldwide. In 2015 *Forbes* ranked Verizon as the 22nd largest corporation on the planet. Verizon operates 50 data centers around the world, including those hosting the “cloud.”

As one of its corporate websites notes, Verizon's network includes more than 800,000 route miles of overland and undersea cables. To put this in perspective the website notes, “The Verizon network is large enough to circle the world more than 20 times.”

The company's network extends to customers in more than 2,700 cities in 150 countries around the globe. Verizon is a member of a consortium of companies involved in the 15,000-kilometer Europe India Gateway (EIG) cable system, which provides tremendous bandwidth between Europe, the Middle East, Africa and India and the Trans-Pacific Express optical network system (TPE) providing service between the US and Asia. A look at a map of undersea cables makes it obvious these cable routes follow major shipping routes around the globe, which have evolved with global commerce.

A quick review of Verizon's job postings shows the company is hiring in dozens of international locations, from Tampa, Florida to Stuttgart, Germany and Bangalore, India.

Over the last several decades the global telecom industry has consolidated and is now dominated by a relatively few transnational corporations. Verizon is the second largest in the world, behind China Mobile. According to *Forbes*, the next five are: AT&T (US), Vodaphone (UK), Nippon Telegraph and Telephone (Japan), SoftBank's Sprint (Japan)

and Deutsche Telekom (Germany).

The top six telecom giants have 1,228,563 employees worldwide and in 2015 had combined sales of \$617 billion and a market capitalization of \$891.5 billion. Flush with cash, the companies are not spending money on serious improvements of infrastructure, let alone improving the wages and conditions of workers. Instead they are spending billions on stock buybacks, dividends and mergers and acquisitions, like Verizon's 2014 purchase of Vodafone's 45 percent stake in the wireless division and last year's \$4.5 billion acquisition of AOL. Such moves only benefit the wealthiest shareholders, including company executives, and vast and powerful financial institutions, which hold ultimate sway over the industry.

These companies are not constrained by national borders. Instead their networks integrate seamlessly across countries and continents. For example, a person can snap a photo on the beach in Los Angeles on a Verizon phone and instantly their friend riding a train outside Paris, connected via the French telecom Orange, can view that photo on their laptop.

In sharp contradistinction to the global character of the telecom industry, the CWA and IBEW are conducting the strike on a nationalist platform under the banner of protecting "American" jobs.

There is no question that Verizon and other corporations are seeking to exploit lower-paid workers in the most impoverished countries in order to maximize their profits. Workers in the call centers in the Philippines, for example, work for contractors who fire them only to rehire them in order to avoid paying any benefits. Their pay averages \$230 a month. And these workers are forced to work the night shift with no extra compensation to meet the peak demand from calls originating in the US.

These workers are not our enemies. The issues facing US workers are universal. Last year in Spain, telecom workers struck and occupied a telephone exchange in Barcelona to demand the end of "precariousness and slave labor." In India, thousands of workers struck in opposition to privatization of the telecom system. In Poland there were telecom strikes in opposition to mass layoffs

But protectionism and economic nationalism, promoted not only by the unions but by politicians like Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, are a reactionary utopia, which is aimed at convincing us that American workers have more in common with "our" bosses, like Verizon CEO Lowell C. McAdam, than we do with our class brothers and sisters around the world.

Such nationalism plays directly into the hands of the global corporations, which want to pit workers against each other in a race to the bottom and has never "saved" a single job. The failure of this strategy stands evident in the

archipelago of derelict and ruined factories stretching from Syracuse to Chicago, from Newark to Baltimore and in countless other "rust belt" locations.

The CWA has no strategy or intent to wage a global fight. Before the strike some workers proposed that the CWA try to organize Filipino workers but the union officials brushed them off. Instead the local union has made us engage in various stunts, such as marching us over the Brooklyn Bridge to attend the Democratic primaries or protesting scabs at hotels, which have had no real effect on Verizon's global or even national operations.

We can no longer afford to follow the unions into the blind alley of nationalism and subordinate ourselves to the interest of the national capitalist class and their demands to expropriate ever-greater surplus value from our labor. The promotion of nationalism also goes hand-in-hand with militarism and war.

Instead we have to adopt an international strategy to unite all workers—in the Philippines, Mexico, China and everywhere—against the moneyed global elites. Under capitalism, the revolutionary developments in technology and globalization have been and will continue to be used to destroy our jobs and wages. Under socialism the huge telecom monopolies—built up by the labor of generations of workers—would be turned into publicly owned utilities, democratically controlled by the working class.

Only in this way can the vast wealth produced by the collective labor of workers around the world be used to provide universal, affordable and reliable communication for everyone, and all telecom workers be guaranteed a good standard of living, decent work conditions and a comfortable retirement.



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