

Obama's labor department intervenes in Verizon strike

Our reporters
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US Labor Secretary Thomas Perez announced that Verizon and the Communications Workers of American (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) would resume negotiations Tuesday. The decision followed a meeting by company and union negotiators with Perez Sunday.

Verizon workers should be warned that federal intervention is aimed at wrapping up the strike and assisting management in imposing its concession demands, including the elimination of thousands of jobs, slashing health care and pension benefits and transforming the workforce into essentially low-paid casual laborers.

Perez intervened in the West Coast longshoreman's dispute last year to help the International Longshore and Warehouse Union impose a five-year sellout agreement that imposed wage increases below the rate of inflation and changes in health care "to foster greater efficiency," that is, cut costs for the employers at the expense of workers.

If the Obama administration is becoming involved in the Verizon strike it is because it fears the walkout has the potential to inspire a broader movement of the working class. It is concerned that the courageous struggle of telephone workers could become the catalyst for a rebellion against government-corporate attempts to create a low-wage economy.

The intervention of the Obama White House comes as the strike by nearly 40,000 Verizon workers enters its second month with workers facing ramped-up provocations from the telecom giant. In addition to cutting off workers' health care at the beginning of the month, the company has employed strikebreaking and increased police violence against the workers. In addition, the company has attributed unsubstantiated claims of "vandalism" of wire lines to striking workers.

Last week, James Smith, a CWA member from Brooklyn's Local 1109 with 18 years experience, was hit by a uniformed police officer driving a scab vehicle in Queens, New York.

This was soon followed by a similar incident in Westborough, Massachusetts, when a scab vehicle hit striker Joseph Rooney, 47, as police were escorting them out of a hotel Thursday morning. The driver, George Pulling, 55, of Naples, Florida, accelerated his pick-up truck, with Rooney ending up on his hood. Police arrested Pulling on two counts of assault and battery with a dangerous weapon, one count of driving under the influence of alcohol, and operating a vehicle without a license. Pulling had a history of numerous drunk driving offenses.

In the face of a violent and concerted strikebreaking operations of the company and the state, the CWA and IBEW have sought to keep the workers quarantined, restricting their actions to fruitless protests outside of Verizon's non-unionized wireless store locations while making appeals to economic nationalism and the Democratic Party.

The WSWWS spoke to Verizon strikers in Westborough, Massachusetts on Saturday about the escalating police violence against workers. Verizon picket Chris from IBEW Local 2325 said, "They're housing scabs in the hotel here," he said, pointing toward a nearby Extended Stay America Hotel. "They probably had about 24 of them the other day. We had about 80 people out here. They've kept them in for the last two days. Maybe they've started to do real background checks, because they're not letting them out anymore."

Chris said that Joseph Rooney "got banged up, but he's OK. He's lucky because he got his arm underneath his head when he went down. If his head

had been hit first he would have been in trouble.”

Chris described the scene on Thursday morning: “So this guy came through the line. You could see he was agitated. They put two of these guys [referring to the police on the picket line] on the front of the truck, two on the back of the truck. We give them way—not a lot of way, granted. And he panicked and hit the gas.

“He hit one of the police officers with his mirror. And there was no way for our guy to go but up on the hood, and he grabbed on to the wipers and tried to hold on. [Pulling] drove down here about a hundred feet, and he hit the brakes and our guy went tumbling off of the front onto the street.

“And then the driver stopped. It got really chaotic there for about three minutes. Our guys tried to get to him and the police tried to get us away from him. The police came back under control and put the guy in cuffs. He was obviously inebriated. Then they walked to the cruiser with him.”

Chris said the strikebreaker was “textbook.” He continued, “It was his fourth DUI, he came up here from Florida. These people aren’t contributing anything to society.” He said, “These people are recruited specifically to scab. These guys are recruited as replacement workers and that’s why emotions run high.”

Speaking of the company’s housing of strikebreakers at the hotel, Chris said, “I anticipate they’ll try to get them all out of here. Whether they move them somewhere else, we’ll find them. We found them in Middleborough; we found them here. There was somebody staying at the Day’s Inn for a while. These are bad dudes.”

He said it was a dangerous situation with these scabs operating machinery, adding, “Whether or not these people are going into people’s houses, I don’t know. The FIOS product is pretty manpower intensive. You can be in a house all day; it can be eight hours in a person’s residence. I wouldn’t trust these guys to walk my dog.”

In Boston, workers have mounted daily pickets outside the Verizon Wireless store at Downtown Crossing. The WSWs spoke Saturday with Bob Shine, a central office technician and picket captain.

When asked about the mood among workers after Thursday’s incident in Westborough, Bob responded that the strikebreaker who was driving the vehicle had

“a DUI and a suspended license up from Florida. They hired this guy who doesn’t even have a valid driver’s license, but yet he’s doing replacement work.”

Given the sort of people being brought in as replacement workers by Verizon, Bob was not surprised by the dangers they pose.

The WSWs reporter also raised the importance of not limiting workers’ struggles to one industry, in light of the recent lockout of Honeywell workers and the recent struggles conducted by Detroit teachers and autoworkers.

Bob responded that “we’ve got to be in this fight together, and I agree with you there.”

He said that, in the absence of a strike fund from the IBEW, many Verizon workers are living off their savings while on strike. The company’s COBRA health insurance is “just unaffordable for anybody,” he said, and some picketers have had to buy their own insurance on the Massachusetts Health Connector.

Although some striking workers are doing side jobs to support their families, he said, “It’s really hard to find full-time work and still do your picketing assignments.”



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