

CWA agrees to federal mediator, prepares sellout of Verizon strike

Samuel Davidson**18 May 2016**

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After telling striking workers for weeks that it would not accede to Verizon's demands for a federal mediator, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) agreed to mediation yesterday during talks in Washington, DC overseen by the Obama administration.

The CWA and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) are preparing a reprise of the sellout of the 2011 strike, which was shut down after two weeks with the unions telling workers they should place their confidence in a federal mediator. Predictably Obama's mediator imposed a contract that imposed sweeping health care concessions on behalf of the telecom giant.

The "negotiations" in Washington, which are continuing this week, are not between two antagonistic parties. On the contrary, the unions are conspiring with Verizon and the Obama administration to defeat the Verizon workers and prevent their opposition from triggering a far broader mobilization of millions of workers who are facing the same corporate-government attacks.

In addition to US Labor Secretary Thomas Perez, the Deputy Director of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, Allison Beck, will join the talks. Beck, who was nominated to the position by Obama in 2014, served for 20 years as the general counsel of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) union.

The CWA is now trying to convince striking workers that her background in the IAM will be favorable to workers. The IAM is notorious, however, for collaborating with Boeing and the airline giants in ramming concessions down the throats of workers.

At every turn, Verizon has exploited the treachery of the CWA and IBEW, which delayed calling the strike for eight months after the contract expiration, giving Verizon more than enough time to hire and train an army of an

estimated 20,000 strikebreakers. The unions did not want a potential strike at the same time that some 200,000 autoworkers and steelworkers were also coming up for contracts last summer.

Allied with the Obama administration and the Democrats, the CWA has remained silent on the strikebreaking efforts being backed by big-city mayors like Bill de Blasio, whose New York City cops, driving vanloads of scabs through picket lines, ran down a striker last week in Queens. This has only encouraged further violence, with the latest incident involving a scab running down Anthony Davenport, a 48-year-old striker who was hit by a contractor truck on a picket line Tuesday morning in Boylston, Massachusetts, 44 miles west of Boston.

The CWA and the IBEW have deliberately isolated the month-long strike by nearly 40,000 Verizon workers. Exploiting this, the company is sticking to every one of the major demands contained in its "last, best and final offer." These include the ability to close call centers and lay off thousands of workers, cutting health care and pension benefits for both active and retired workers, and turning much of the workforce into what would amount to roaming work crews forced to transfer far from their homes.

The unions are acting in conjunction with the Obama administration, which has centered its economic policies on enriching the super-wealthy while attacking the living standards and social programs of the working class. The aim of these policies, carried out in collaboration with the unions, is to drive down workers' living standards and to help make American manufacturing more competitive in the world market.

This policy was initiated during the 2009 restructuring of the auto industry where the Obama administration, with the assistance of the United Auto Workers, pushed through contract changes that cut starting wages to between \$14 and \$15 an hour. Likewise, the aim of the

Affordable Care Act, known as Obamacare, was not to provide universal high quality health care to everyone, but to provide a path for corporations to cut and eliminate health care coverage to its employees and retirees.

The unions are paying only a pittance in strike benefits, despite the multimillion-dollar “defense fund,” and trying to starve workers, who have also had their medical insurance cut off by Verizon, into submission.

Rank-and-file workers must begin organizing now to reject the imminent sellout agreement. Committees should be organized, independent of the unions and the Democratic Party, to fight for the expansion of the strike to include all telecom workers and the broadest sections of the entire working class.

The WSWS *Verizon Strike Newsletter* spoke with workers on the picket line in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Jen, a FiOS customer service worker with 20 years at Verizon, said, “We are all beginning to worry about our mortgages and our bills. Our kids are getting sick of having grilled cheese sandwiches every night. We don’t know what’s going to happen. I have 20 years of service and many have spent their entire lives working for this company. Can you imagine how humiliating it is to apply for public assistance? It’s disgusting.”

Referring to workers in the Philippines, who are reportedly being paid less than \$2 an hour by Verizon, Jen said, “All workers should be able to make a decent wage for an honest day’s work. This is a battle against the greedy executives of the world. I’m not sure how one person [Verizon CEO Lowell McAdam] can justify making \$18 million a year.”

Verizon has terminated health insurance for striking workers. WSWS reporters explained that after Allegheny Technologies Inc. canceled healthcare coverage for 2,200 locked-out workers, at least one worker died because he did not think he could afford to go to the hospital. “He didn’t think he could afford [to seek medical care]. It’s sad,” Jen responded. “That would never happen to an executive, now would it?”

Another striker, Bill asserted, “As a parent with six kids, it’s no big surprise now when our children finish college with huge debts and can’t find a job. I have a theory that this is what happens when you start managing things from a spreadsheet—but it’s someone’s livelihood that is affected by that choice.”

When a WSWS reporter explained that the unions were betraying the strike, Bill said, “That’s true. Every once in awhile you get the idea that maybe they’ve got their own agenda that has nothing to do with me, the person they

represent.”

Mark, another striking worker, explained how the termination of health care benefits was affecting him. “I got walking pneumonia. I went and got medication but I have no insurance now, so I don’t know what’s going to happen. I tried to order my blood pressure medication back on April 30, but I got a call back from Rite Aid telling me that my insurance wouldn’t cover it until May 4. And when I run out of that now, I don’t know what is going to happen. I may just have to pay out of pocket, I guess. It’s a squeeze.

“I like that the WSWS said, ‘the working class has to unite.’ We have to or there will be no jobs left!” On the issue of the growing danger of war between the US and Russia or China, Mark noted, “That’s been a long time coming. It’s like the Middle East. Everyone wants a piece of that. These countries always got to keep their foot in the door. We need a revolution. Neither party is with us.”

Mike, a FiOS customer service representative, was wary of the company’s statements. “We’re not allowed to be at the meeting so we don’t know what is going on. And I know for a fact Verizon is lying to us. The CEO is either ignorant or he has no integrity. Either way, it doesn’t sit right with me.”

John, a striking Verizon worker, said, “It would be nice if the union would fork out to pay for everybody’s health care while we’re on strike. With the amount of money they have, they should. They have millions of dollars from us, from our union dues. They’ve got to have some investments; I’m sure they’re not just letting it sit somewhere.”

When WSWS reporters said the unions would try to push through a sellout contract, John responded, “That’s exactly right. They do that. I see their emails. I see how they word things. They did that once before in 2011. It’s the same thing, we didn’t make anything.”



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