

CWA, Verizon impose blackout on contract talks

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Talks between Verizon, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) continued Wednesday in Washington, DC under the auspices of the US Department of Labor. In a statement to the press, Obama's Labor Secretary Thomas Perez said the unions and management had agreed to impose a news blackout on the negotiations, which now involve a federal mediator.

Some 39,000 Verizon workers continue to walk picket lines in a contract struggle that is now in its second month. The CWA and IBEW are presenting the involvement of Allison Beck, the federal mediator overseeing the talks, as a victory for striking workers.

However, Beck, who now heads the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, is a tried and trusted defender of corporate interests. In 2014 she oversaw contract talks between New York's Metropolitan Opera and musicians that resulted in significant and precedent-setting pay cuts. Before that Beck served for 20 years as the highly paid general counsel of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) spanning the years 1989-2010, a period during which the union presided over massive job losses and concessions at Boeing, and other aerospace, airline and manufacturing companies.

The news blackout on the negotiations agreed to by the CWA and IBEW is an attack on the right of workers to be informed and a further indication that the unions are conspiring with management and the Obama administration to impose a flagrant sellout. If the White House is becoming involved it is only because it is determined to shut down the strike before it becomes a catalyst for a broader movement of the working class.

After months of telling workers they would not submit to Verizon's demands for a federal mediator,

the CWA and IBEW have done exactly that. They are preparing a repeat of the betrayal of the 2011 strike, which the unions shut down after two weeks while telling workers to place their confidence in mediation. The result was sweeping health care concessions. This time the consequences of such treachery will be more dire than ever with the company determined to get rid of thousands of "legacy" workers.

There is not the slightest indication that Verizon has backed down on its demands for expanded contracting out of work, cutting health care for active and retired workers and the right to force workers to take on job assignments far from their homes. Workers must resist any attempt by the CWA and IBEW to quickly end the strike and force a return to work before a ratification vote. At the same time rank-and-file workers must demand full access and sufficient time to study the contract.

Every move the unions have made has only aided and abetted the corporate-government attack on strikers. The CWA delayed calling the strike for eight months after the contract expiration, giving the company ample time to prepare a massive strikebreaking operation. The chief reason for this delay is that the AFL-CIO did not want a Verizon strike at the same time contracts were expiring for 170,000 auto and steelworkers.

The unions are maintaining their silence in the face of continued violent attacks on pickets, with another Verizon worker run down this week in Boylston, Massachusetts. The scab contractor who hit the worker with his truck was later arrested for leaving the scene of an accident, assault and battery and driving with a suspended license.

The recent attempt by the CWA to bar reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* from the picket lines in New York City is another indication that the unions are

preparing to shut down the strike and impose a sellout agreement. The *WSWS Verizon Strike Newsletter* has been workers' most reliable source of information since the walkout began.

Meanwhile, the readership of the *WSWS Verizon Strike Newsletter* continues to expand. One Verizon worker wrote in, "I think a six-week long strike with no end in sight is an outrage. It feels like we all have quit our jobs. We're not informed enough by the union. Now, with a mediator in place, it seems like they're going to side with the company and we're going to get nothing. Which makes this whole strike in vain."

Peggy, a retired telecom worker and a subscriber to the *WSWS Verizon Strike Newsletter*, said she was very concerned about possible cuts to retiree health care.

"When I started working for New York Telephone in 1966 this was a job for life. It is not like that now.

"Retirees haven't had a raise or increase in our cost of living since 1994, but prices in the meantime have gone up exponentially. I am afraid they will go after us in this contract, because we are not 'productive' anymore.

"If this is the way they are treating retirees, I can imagine how they are treating those who still work there."

Peggy said she was concerned about the intervention of the Obama administration in the strike. "I feel that now it's gone to the feds it will be like 2011. The feds will force them back to work with a crappy contract. The feds are not for the people, they are for the large corporations. The people aren't going to get anything from them.

"The union started working last August without a contract. The unions are not like they used to be. They do what they want to do. Either they will send them back to work without a contract or a bad contract. This is the biggest strike in recent history, so you can be sure other companies are watching. It is important."

The *WSWS Verizon Strike Newsletter* recently spoke to several autoworkers who have been following developments in the strike. They spoke about the Verizon strike in relation to their recent experience with the United Auto Workers (UAW), which rammed through sellout contracts at the Detroit automakers as well as parts supplier Nexteer Automotive.

A tier two worker at the Fiat Chrysler Jefferson North

Assembly plant in Detroit said, "The Verizon workers deserve 100 percent support. They have been out for a month already and workers have been run down on the picket line."

Reflecting on the experience of autoworkers with the 2015 auto contract struggle, she added, "The unions are not for us. They are for management and the upper echelons."

Verizon workers should be prepared "for smoke and mirrors and BS," she continued. "They'll dress it up to make you think you are getting the majority of things you are fighting for, but you are not. They will sweeten the pot with a nice signing bonus, but they will give up a whole lot more."

On the role of Obama administration, she said, "They know the workers are getting the shaft. They are portraying like they are trying to help, but they are really not.

"You can't rely on the unions or the government. They are working together against the workers. Workers need an independent party. It won't be easy to start it, but it is necessary. If everyone united together, it would be a force to be reckoned with. We are all in a common fight," she added.

A worker at Nexteer Automotive in Saginaw, Michigan, also spoke to the *WSWS* about the significance of the Verizon struggle. Workers at Nexteer, a parts supplier for General Motors and other auto manufacturers, struck for one day last November, but were then sent back to work without a contract by the UAW.

"Workers should unite and really stick together. You have to think of the interests of workers as a whole. We were sent back to work, but didn't have a contract." Verizon workers "should wait and read the whole contract before you vote," she said. "We voted, but didn't really have a complete contract. It turns out it contained things we didn't even know about."



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