

As CWA prepares sellout, Verizon strikers discuss way forward on WSWS online call

Our reporter
20 May 2016

Verizon strikers from New York City; Philadelphia; Boston; Washington, DC and other cities joined an online conference call Tuesday hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site Verizon Strike Newsletter*.

Autoworkers and other workers from around the country also took part in the two-hour call, titled “One month on strike: The way forward Verizon strikers.” In total, more than 60 people participated.

The call was held after the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) agreed to the resumption of talks, overseen by Obama’s labor secretary and a federal mediator. The CWA and IBEW ended a two-week strike in 2011 after agreeing to similar federal mediation, only to accept deep and precedent-setting health care cuts. A similar, yet even more damaging betrayal is now in the works.

Jerry White, the Socialist Equality Party’s candidate for US president, opened the discussion by reviewing the political significance of the Obama administration’s intervention in the strike and the collusion of the CWA and IBEW. “The main purpose for the White House intervention,” White said, “is to wind down the strike as soon as possible and impose the dictates of the giant telecommunications firm.”

Obama’s intervention followed the decision by a judge to grant the National Labor Relations Board’s request for an injunction banning picketing at New York City hotels housing Verizon strikebreakers. It also came after the dispatch of hundreds of police to escort scabs by New York’s Democratic Party mayor, Bill de Blasio. This showed that strikers “were locked in a political struggle not only against a single company, by an entire class of corporate owners and the capitalist state that defends them,” White said.

With growing signs of worker resistance and political radicalization, the Democrats and the unions are fearful that a prolonged and ever more bitter strike in some of the nation’s largest cities could trigger a far broader mobilization of the working class.

If this strike was not to end in another defeat, White said, rank-and-file Verizon workers had to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by setting up strike committees independent of the unions and the Democratic Party, to fight for

the broadest mobilization of the working class behind the strike.

The SEP, he said, was fighting to unite the separate and individual struggles of workers into a “mass counteroffensive against the corporate elite and all of its political parties and representatives.” Inequality, poverty and war had to be abolished, White said, by “putting an end to their source—the capitalist system.”

After these remarks Bob, a striking worker from Philadelphia, was the first to speak. “I’m a CWA member and we have conference calls every week, which are only a pep talk. Are you telling me that the [CWA President] Chris Sheltons and [CWA Vice President] Ed Mooneys in the CWA leadership are in bed with the Obama administration and the Verizon hierarchy only to pad their own pockets in the end?”

“The short answer,” White said, “is yes.” He went on to explain that the root cause of the corruption or cowardice of the union leaders lay in the nature of the trade unions themselves and their response to economic changes that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. The nationally based and pro-capitalist unions reacted to the globalization of production, White said, by helping their “own” capitalist class slash jobs and living standards in order to become more internationally competitive.

While millions of workers lost their jobs and saw their living standards destroyed, White said, the union bureaucracy developed new sources of income, including seats on corporate boards and billion-dollar investment funds tied to the ever greater exploitation of the workers they falsely claimed to represent.

After the Verizon striker thanked White for the explanation, Gladys, a GM worker from Flint, Michigan passionately recounted the bitter experiences with the United Auto Workers (UAW) union.

“I worked at Buick and watched the UAW and GM destroy the working man. I watched all the shops closed down and the scabbing out [of] all the parts plants. The UAW is not for the working man—they are for the government and for big corporations. I watched GM jump in bed with the UAW, working hand-in-hand cutting the throat of the working man.

“The government let GM go bankrupt. Two generations had stocks and believed they were going to come out of work with

some pensions. Right now I'm living on the top edge of poverty.

"I want the Verizon workers to see this. Don't trust the unions. They have already decided they are going to cut your throat."

White pointed out that President Obama had just visited Flint and told residents "everything was fine" and they should stop protesting the poisoning of their water and the lack of any significant relief from federal, state and local authorities.

Gladys added, "I've been to Washington twice and begged for money. But they are going to let Flint die. The UAW and the government betrayed Flint. How dare Obama come here and exploit Flint by making believe he took a sip of water."

Evan, a writer for the WSWS, explained the parallel between the isolation of the Verizon strike and what the United Steelworkers (USW) did to 2,200 workers who were locked out by Allegheny Technology (ATI) from August 2015 to March 2016. The USW forced 30,000 workers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal to continue working without a contract. The CWA did not call out Verizon workers at the time, he said, because the AFL-CIO did not want joint struggles by telecom, steel, auto and other workers. In the end, the USW rammed through the pro-company contract at ATI.

Another speaker who said he was a "Verizon striker," but who was later identified by other callers as an IBEW official in Boston, attempted to defend the unions, saying they had "drawn a line in the sand" and "were trying to get a good contract." Referring to White's explanation of the transformation of the unions during the 1970s and their betrayal of strike after strike, the union official said, "Talking about things that happened in the 1970s or Reagan's firing of the air traffic controllers doesn't have anything to do with what we are fighting for today." At that point, the GM worker interjected, insisting, "It has everything to do with it!"

The union official combined this ignorant attempt to conceal past betrayals with a defense of the capitalist system. "We are part of the capitalist system, we work for capitalist companies and we need those companies to succeed."

White pointed out that helping the capitalist "succeed" today meant collaborating in the impoverishment of the working class. While hundreds of thousands of electricians have lost their jobs and taken wage and benefit cuts, the head of the IBEW brought home \$450,000, plus other unrecorded perks, last year. As for the CWA, while it put strikers on starvation rations, it had siphoned off millions from its half-billion "defense fund" to pay the salaries and perks of the union executives and an army of functionaries.

Unable to answer and sensing the hostility of workers, the IBEW official announced that he had another engagement and got off the call.

Other Verizon strikers from New York City also spoke. Towards the end, Bob from Philadelphia asked, "Do we sit back and wait to see what contract they bring back, and find out

that the union is not doing what is right for us?"

White responded that workers had to organize themselves and reach out broadly to the working class, including teachers and students, noting that students in Boston had walked out that day to protest budget cuts. "Rank-and-file workers should organize committees, independent of the CWA, IBEW and the Democrats, and draw up an appeal to other sections of workers and youth to defend your strike."

Warning that the unions were preparing to shut down the strike perhaps even before a ratification vote and rush through a rotten deal, White said, "Workers cannot sit back and wait. You have to prepare now for the backroom deal that the unions, Verizon and the Obama administration will come up with, and prepare to defeat such a sellout agreement."

"This must be the beginning of a genuine mobilization of the working class. In other words, you have to take the conduct of this struggle in your own hands and break from the sickly defeatist policy of the unions and their support to the Democratic Party. Instead you should appeal to the working class, and say: 'Our fight is your fight, it's not just Verizon, it's General Motors, it's the banks, it's the Democrats and Republicans, whether it is Clinton, Trump or Sanders. They are closing our schools, threatening more wars, taking away our rights.'

"What is needed is a rebellion against the corporatist unions and a fight to mobilize the entire working class," White said. In this battle, he added, "the Socialist Equality Party and the WSWS will give Verizon workers every assistance we can."



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