

With Verizon sticking to demands, workers look to break CWA isolation of strike

Samuel Davidson
25 May 2016

Verizon's Chief Executive Officer Lowell McAdam made it clear Tuesday that the company will not back down on its demands to cut benefits and force through job cuts despite the six-week strike by 40,000 workers on the East Coast of the United States.

Verizon's goals, McAdam declared, "are to get our cost a bit more in line. We're obviously more expensive from a wage and benefit than our competitors are." McAdam was speaking before hundreds of corporate executives and investors at the J.P Morgan Technology, Media and Telecom conference in Boston.

McAdam admitted that the strike is having an effect on the company and with installations of new services down he said to expect lower earnings than in the previous quarter. But the CEO stated the lost revenue would be made up once the strike ended. The company needed to cut costs, he declared, if it is going to remain competitive in the landline business.

In other words, the company is willing to take the short-term losses in order to achieve its long-term goal of slashing health care and pension benefits and ridding itself of thousands of better paid "legacy" workers.

The company also wants work rule changes that would allow it to close 11 call centers and transfer workers up to 100 miles from their current work locations. Verizon is also demanding the power to force workers to transfer anywhere for up to 60 days a year.

While the company remains intransigent, union officials are repeating the empty slogan of "one day longer, one day stronger." The CWA and the IBEW have agreed to the Obama administration's media blackout of ongoing negotiations precisely because the company is refusing to budge. This has exposed the bankruptcy of the unions' entire "strategy" of making demoralizing appeals to shareholders, organizing photo-ops with Democratic Party candidates and soliciting worthless criticisms of Verizon from local politicians.

No organization that genuinely represented workers would hide information from workers who have sacrificed for a month and a half. The "negotiations" at the US Labor

Department do not involve antagonistic parties, they are a conspiracy by the corporation, the Obama administration and the unions to end the strike and impose a sellout even worse than 2011.

Obama continues to intervene on Verizon's behalf. On Monday, the National Labor Relation Board sought an injunction to prevent picketing at Boston area hotels that Verizon has been using to house strikebreakers. Earlier this month the NLRB requested and obtained a similar injunction in New York City. A federal judge, an Obama appointee, issued the injunction after a picketer was injured by a New York City cop driving a van of strikebreakers across the picket line.

Facing this gang-up, the only way Verizon strikers can take the fight forward is to break the isolation of the strike imposed by the unions and fight for the broadest mobilization of the entire working class against the government-backed corporate attack. In the first breakthrough 1,700 workers at AT&T West in San Diego went on strike last Friday. Strikers on the picket lines expressed their solidarity with the Verizon strikers and sympathy for united strike action on both coasts of the US.

Even though Verizon and AT&T—the world's second and third largest telecom giants—compete for customers and profits in some markets, they are entirely united in their war against workers' jobs and living standards. Despite this the CWA is forcing another 14,000 AT&T workers in California and Nevada to continue working without a contract. The union has labeled San Diego a "grievance" strike instead of a walkout over the contract in order to isolate the workers and shut it down as soon as possible.

An AT&T worker in Northern California told the *WSWS Verizon Strike Newsletter* he only learned of the San Diego strike from his supervisor and that there were no reports on the walkout on the web sites of his and other locals or the district. The CWA is deliberately keeping the rest of the AT&T West workers in the dark because they want to prevent a rank-and-file rebellion and a mass walkout that would strengthen the Verizon workers.

The CWA canceled their weekly teleconference Monday. Privately, union officials are telling members to place faith in the federal mediator—a former general counsel for the International Association of Machinists (IAM)—who they say will force Verizon to back down. This is a fraud. Allison Beck is a dependable defender of the corporations whose tenure with the IAM coincided with one betrayal of workers after the other.

If this battle is not to end in defeat, workers must take the struggle into their own hands through the organization of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and the Democrats, to establish lines of communication and fight for a national strike of telecom workers. Instead of appealing to the Democrats—who are helping Verizon break the strike—telecom workers should appeal for support from workers facing similar attacks, including the 2.2 million private and public sector workers whose contracts expire this year.

The WSWS *Verizon Strike Newsletter* spoke with striking workers in New York and Pennsylvania.

Bob, a field technician with 20 years of experience at Verizon in New York City, said, “For the past half of a year Verizon has been run like a prison. People were getting suspended for anything. One guy was 15 minutes late during lunch and was suspended for 30 days; another one got a 20-day suspension for picking up a cup of coffee.

“The union files grievances, but it takes forever and sometimes management doesn’t even look at them. One guy worked here for 35 years and was basically terminated. They told him to go on disability since he would be fired if he came to work. Forty people have gone on disability just because of the constant stress of working here.

“The company moving us around and our medical are important issues, but we also can’t work under these conditions. I believe that is why the AT&T workers are striking in San Diego. I am sure they are experiencing the same thing.”

Another worker in New York said, “For the company it is more important to pay the shareholders and meet short-term gains that give us what we deserve. This has become normal and it impacts how everything, from what we have to deal with, to the environment.

“Who are the mediators? They are company people. Now there is a blackout and we don’t know what is going on. We aren’t getting the reports we used to and even those were tailored to look a certain way. I don’t believe everything the union says. The union is like anything else: The farther you get to the top the less they are connected to us, and what we are experiencing.”

On the picket line in Pittsburgh, Linda McClain, who has worked at Verizon for 17 years, said, “Verizon has made

billions in profits. So when they say they can’t afford to continue to give workers benefits that just isn’t true. Meanwhile, the executive committee gets millions of dollars and has full and complete benefits.

“We know the money is there. It is not about not having the money to meet the demands not only for the workers but for the retirees who built this company. We are striking so that we are not the working poor. Sure, you have a job, but you can’t meet your obligations and take care of your family.”

Charles Schuck has five years as a switchman. He said, “To me the most important issue is job security and preventing the company from moving our jobs. I care about health care and pensions, and retiree health care. My mother retired from Verizon in 2010. Under the company’s proposal, they want to make retirees pay just as much for their health care as somebody who is working for the company. That concerns me for her, because she is retired and is not making as much as somebody actively working for the company.

“This is definitely corporate greed. They make \$1.3 billion a month. Basically, they are coming after our benefits and our livelihood. Why? So they can make more money.

“To me it does seem that this strike has to be expanded. To me, the company doesn’t want to compromise at all. They have a mindset. They have their demands and that’s it. We definitely need more people involved.”

In Syracuse, New York, a worker said, “We are likely to give back no matter what. Until the whole country gets together and realizes what the hell is going on nothing will happen. The union is paid off, so is the government. I’ve noticed since the 2011 strike that the public is more supportive.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact