

CWA, IBEW maintain silence on talks, continue to isolate Verizon strike

Nick Barrickman
27 May 2016

A shroud of secrecy hangs over the talks being held in Washington, DC between executives from Verizon and the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) after ten days of supposed negotiations overseen by the US Department of Labor.

The CWA and IBEW are actively colluding in the information blackout demanded by the Obama administration. No organization that genuinely represented workers would agree to conceal vital information in the midst of a nearly two-month battle against the giant telecom. If they are doing so it is only because Verizon is refusing to budge from its “last, best and final” offer and the whole charade in Washington, DC is nothing more than the prelude for another miserable sellout.

The union and its apologists in various pseudo-left groups like the International Socialist Organization and the publication *Jacobin* continue to repeat the empty slogan “One day longer, one day stronger” even as the continued isolation of the strike has left workers vulnerable to provocations by company strikebreakers, the courts and state and local officials.

In the latest attack, a judge in Wilmington, Delaware Thursday threatened to hold representatives from CWA Locals 13100 and 13101 in contempt for allegedly allowing workers to “harass” and yell obscenities at strikebreakers. Under the threat of heavy fines, union officials have been instructed to silence workers under the pretext that they are engaged in “hate speech.”

“Until you know someone’s situation, it is not really fair to call someone a scab or a scumbag or assume they are involved in a job because of some antiunion position,” Delaware Chancery Court Vice Chancellor J. Travis Laster said. Laster banned strikers from following scab vehicles at distances closer than 30 yards and from shouting supposed racial or gender slurs.

After the betrayal of the 2011 strike, the CWA accepted a “back-to-work agreement” that sanctioned the firing of workers for “hate speech” and “picket line misconduct.” It

is well known that strikebreakers under the direction of management provoke such incidents, which are then videotaped and used to dismiss militant workers. Now exercising free speech to oppose strikebreakers could result in potential fines and even jail.

The Delaware ruling is part of a consistent assault on Verizon workers by every level of government, from the Obama administration on down. Following the running down of a Verizon worker by a New York City cop, driving a vanload of scabs, on May 9, Obama’s National Labor Relations Board intervened on behalf of the company, filing and receiving an injunction banning the picketing of hotels that house scabs.

The CWA and IBEW are allied with the Obama administration and the Democrats, and along with the AFL-CIO and Change to Win federations, are doing everything to prevent the Verizon strike from sparking a broader movement among millions of other workers who have suffered declining real wages and an attack on their health care and pension benefits.

On Wednesday, the CWA ordered 1,700 striking AT&T West workers in San Diego, California back to work less than a week after calling the walkout. Terrified by the prospect of a united struggle of telecom workers on both the East and West Coasts, the CWA has kept 16,000 AT&T West workers in California and Nevada on the job since their contracts expired in early April. Facing growing anger from rank-and-file workers, the CWA called a limited strike, not over the lack of a contract but a grievance concerning the monitoring of customer service representatives, which they said was limited to San Diego.

The CWA Local 9509 quickly shut down the strike, claiming with a glib statement on its web site that the grievance had been settled. Calls by the *World Socialist Web Site* to the local seeking information on the supposed settlement were not returned.

An AT&T worker in California told the *WSWS Verizon Strike Newsletter* that the company had yet to even provide the requested call records. “We’re being told the most

ridiculous things,” the worker said. “The union had refused to go back to work until they had been given the records they asked for, now they’re saying they will have them in a few days.

“People are furious. The CWA doesn’t want to walk out. We were told that if AT&T workers walked it would take away attention from the Verizon workers’ strike. What attention? If anything, us striking would draw more attention to it and show that we’re facing the same conditions. In fact, ours are a little worse.”

The telecoms and the government have long taken the measure of the corporate syndicates that call themselves “unions” and know that the CWA and IBEW are about to accept a concession-laden deal that will set the precedent for a further attack on all workers. In a memo to investors on Monday, Barry Sine, a telecom analyst for the brokerage firm Drexel, Hamilton and Co., stated that he anticipates “the strike [will] end relatively soon,” most likely in June.

If Verizon workers are to prevent another defeat it is up to rank-and-file workers to take the initiative themselves. The sickly defeatism of the CWA must be rejected, along with its worthless appeals to corporate shareholders and Democratic Party politicians that are helping Verizon break the strike. Instead, workers should form rank-and-file strike committees, free of the control of the pro-company unions and the big-business politicians, which will appeal for the broadest support for their struggle, including a national strike by all telecom workers. As the strike has already shown, workers are fighting not just Verizon but they are in a political struggle against a whole class of capitalist owners, which controls every lever of government.

The WSWS spoke to striking workers in New York City and Virginia. Frank, who has worked as a field technician for more than 50 years, said, “They want to freeze the pension and then get rid of it next time around. Last contract, they had us pay for the medical and now they want to double what we pay.”

“The current CEO makes \$18 million a year plus he has another \$20 million when he retires. He has a private company plane and a limousine. The place he lives in New Jersey looks like a fort. It has gyms and restaurants. It is almost all occupied by Verizon managers like VPs.” Continuing, he said, “The CEO doesn’t care about landline, only wireless. They sold wireline (telephone, Internet and cable television) in California, Texas, and Florida to Frontier for \$5 billion because they want to get out of wireline altogether. Right now, there are 300,000 wireless and 39,000 wireline workers.

“He [CEO Lowell McAdam] has a new program called QAR (Quality Assurance Review), which is a fast track to suspension. For example, if you’re in the field and take a

lunch fifteen minutes late and return fifteen minutes late without calling them, then they will write you up. You have to call them when you go to the bathroom; you have to call them for everything. You have to tell them where you are all the time.”

Speaking about the conduct of the CWA, Frank said, “The AFL-CIO has 17.8 million members, but the leadership is silent about the strike. The front page of the website states that the organization doesn’t get involved in labor disputes. So what is the point of being a member?”

“The guys here will not allow what happened in 2011 to happen again, when they brought us back to work without a contract. The company was able to get concessions in health benefits. It was a bad contract.

“It’s not happening again and the union knows it. We are about to get, next week, unemployment benefits and get health benefits that the company cut off.

“I am for a general strike,” he concluded.

Referring to the union, a worker in Virginia said, “God protect me from my friends. Since I started working, I’ve seen people leave voluntarily because they were tired. When we go back to work, the company will force us to work whenever it decides, 12-hour shifts, six days a week. They do it because they want workers to get tired and leave rather than get benefits. The new contract will make that possible.”

Another worker stated, “We can’t just strike in one sector. The civil rights movement worked because we did everything necessary to get heard. In 20 years, there will be no middle class, only the poor and the rich. They will have imported the model from the third world.”

“I think our first goal should be to completely deconstruct the union and replace it with something that represents everyone,” he stated.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact