

Opposition grows to CWA effort to shut down Verizon strike

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After announcing an “agreement in principle” with Verizon, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) are moving quickly to shut down the strike by 40,000 telecom workers and rush through a vote. The purported settlement follows nearly two weeks of closed-door talks in Washington, DC between Verizon bosses, the Obama administration and union officials.

The CWA and IBEW are ordering workers back on the job Wednesday, or even Tuesday night, even though there is no real contract. This means that even if the unions succeed in cobbling something together over the next few days, there will be no chance for workers to seriously study and ratify the contract before returning to work. This is a blatant violation of democratic rights and due process.

The IBEW is telling its members that there will be an information meeting Wednesday night, after the return to work, with the vote scheduled for the same meeting. For its part, the CWA has not scheduled a meeting or a vote as of this writing.

The blatant disregard for basic democratic procedures is provoking widespread opposition from Verizon workers. Workers have begun to circulate an online petition demanding that the back-to-work order be rescinded pending the holding of mass membership meetings where the full details of the agreement are distributed.

The unions decided to end the strike just as the walkout was beginning to be felt by Verizon. It also coincides with the June 1 effective date of eligibility for unemployment benefits by 14,000 Verizon strikers in New York state. In addition, CWA strike pay is scheduled to increase to \$400 per week the same day. This would reduce the financial hardship on strikers

and make them less susceptible to pressure to return to work without a decent contract.

A return to work without a contract would dissipate the momentum generated by the strike and hand all the initiative to the company. It would mean that the six-week countdown to unemployment benefits would start all over again. Significantly, Verizon issued an announcement saying it was “very pleased with the agreement in principle” and anxious to see workers return to their jobs. The company had achieved “meaningful changes and enhancements to the contracts to help the wireline business unit compete,” said Marc Reed, Verizon’s chief administrative officer.

The CWA claimed it had attained “improved working families’ living standards,” secured “good union jobs” and achieved the “first union contract at wireless stores.” Workers are also being told that the four-year agreement included a 10.5 percent wages increase that would be rapidly nullified by inflation and increases in out-of-pocket health expenses.

An agreement reached on the basis of the strategy pursued by the CWA and IBEW could be nothing but a sellout. The unions kept workers on the job for more than six months after the contract expired last August. Meanwhile, the company trained and prepared thousands of strikebreakers. When the unions finally called a strike they kept it isolated, keeping other telecom workers on the job, including 17,000 workers at AT&T West who are still working without a contract.

Facing a potential rebellion, the CWA decided to call out 1,700 AT&T workers on May 20 on a local issue. Acknowledging that the strike “came within hours of becoming a full state walk out,” the CWA claimed it reached a settlement in San Diego—without providing any details—and sent workers back to work on May 25.

Two days later, the CWA and IBEW announced they had reached an “agreement in principle” with Verizon.

Throughout the strike the unions have aided and abetted management, seeking to starve workers into submission with insulting strike pay benefits. From the beginning, the CWA and IBEW made it clear they were willing to surrender \$200 million in concessions. They made no serious effort to shut down Verizon work locations, bowing to strikebreaking court injunctions limiting picketing.

Instead of mobilizing the working class behind the Verizon workers, the CWA and IBEW relied on backroom maneuvers with the Obama administration. They remained silent as Obama’s NLRB sought and obtained court injunctions limiting picketing of hotels housing scab replacement workers.

Workers contacted by the WSWS expressed opposition to returning to work without seeing, let alone voting, on a contract. A Verizon striker from upstate New York said, “The strike is not over. If they try to screw us over like in 2011, we are not going to buy it.

“I have been on the picket line every day of the strike. There is no way we will go back to work without seeing the deal, and then finding out it is a sellout. I suspect that whatever minor cosmetic improvements the company agreed to will be doubly paid for by other concessions.”

A Verizon worker from New York City said, “There is a complete blackout. I find it curious. I went through this in 1989. I went back to find health care was a disaster. I heard that it was even worse in this contract.

“They told us to take down picket lines and not approach anyone who is working. But I would prefer to see the contract first. You don’t agree to it before you read it. Once the strike ends, we are stuck. Once the precedent is set everything deteriorates.

“I think the (Obama) administration has been a total disaster. I am going to go back to work and pay a lot more for health care. Hillary Clinton will never get my vote. It is all about profits on the backs of people. It has to stop.

“It appears the unions have lost their way. They seem to have a larger agenda that we are not part of. More and more the unions have become company unions.”

A call-in meeting organized by the WSWS *Verizon Strike Newsletter* was attended by more than 150

workers from New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia and several other states. A worker from New York City said, “All we got was a text saying, 'Take down the picket lines.' Another text said [to] report to work on June 1. Why should we report to work without knowing what’s in the contract? If we do go back we won’t qualify for unemployment benefits. We need to have a meeting before we go back to work. We should bombard the CWA with phone calls demanding a meeting.”

Another worker from New York City said, “Would you lease a car for three years without seeing it first? The only thing we are being told is that we are going to have to pay more for our medical.”

The WSWS Verizon Strike Newsletter is holding an emergency call-in information meeting on Monday, May 30 at 7:00 pm Eastern Time. To participate, call 213-416-1560 and enter PIN 581 991 086#.



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