

Lessons of the Verizon strike

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Nearly 40,000 workers at Verizon Telecommunications returned to their jobs late Tuesday evening and Wednesday morning, ending one of the largest and longest strikes in the US in recent years.

The circumstances surrounding the calling off of the strike were particularly despicable. After 10 days of secret talks overseen by Obama's labor department, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) announced that they had reached an "agreement in principle" over the Memorial Day weekend (when workers were off the picket lines) and were ending the seven-week strike. The unions ordered workers back to work without releasing the full contract—since there was not one—or allowing workers to vote on it.

Union bureaucrats shouted, "We got everything we wanted!" at highly skeptical workers showing up for work Wednesday morning. In an effort to exploit their advantage, Verizon management sought to make an example of militant workers wearing strike t-shirts by sending them home for not wearing "proper attire." A CWA business agent in midtown Manhattan immediately took management's side.

In reality, the wholesale capitulation of the unions gave Verizon, in the words of top executives, all the "key changes sought by the company" to boost its competitiveness and profits.

The deal will shift hundreds of millions of dollars in health care costs onto the backs of active and retired workers. It will also give the world's second largest telecommunications company a free hand to streamline operations by consolidating customer service call centers and prepare the spinoff of its less profitable wire telephone, internet and cable TV unit, which has already seen mass job cuts in recent years.

The struggle at Verizon is far from over. As the consequences of this betrayal become apparent, opposition will grow as voting on whatever actual contract emerges takes place before June 17. Moreover, the struggle of telecom workers is part of the growing

resistance of the working class and radicalization of workers and youth throughout the US and internationally, from last fall's rebellion of autoworkers against the UAW sellout deals, to the spreading waves of strikes and mass protests in France and Belgium against anti-working class labor "reforms."

This makes all the more necessary a careful evaluation of the vital lessons, not only for Verizon workers, but for the working class as a whole.

First, it is necessary to place the struggle at Verizon within the context of the overall strategy of the ruling class and its political representatives, Democrat and Republican. In response to the economic collapse of 2008, the Obama administration oversaw the funneling of trillions of dollars into the banks to prop up the financial system and the wealth of the corporate and financial elite. This has been followed by a coordinated effort to reduce the wages, health care and other benefits of the working class.

The tocsin for the attack on wages was sounded with the 2009 restructuring of the auto industry, overseen by the White House, which was based on the halving of wages for new hires and a significant lowering of health care costs for current workers and retirees. This was followed by the passage of Obamacare in 2010, fraudulently packaged as a "reform," the essential purpose of which was to shift the costs from corporations and the government onto the backs of workers.

The consequence of these policies can be seen in the record growth of social inequality since 2009, with 95 percent of all income gains going to the top 1 percent. Yet this restructuring of class relations is far from over. Under conditions of growing opposition in the working class, and signs of a renewed economic crisis on the horizon, the ruling class is pressing ahead.

While the CWA was promoting Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton, the anti-working class character of the Democratic Party was shown by Obama's National Labor Relations Board, which filed for and received strikebreaking injunctions, and the role of the New York

City Police Department overseen by New York's supposedly progressive mayor, Bill de Blasio. The conspiracy between the unions and the Obama administration culminated in the US Labor Department "talks" which hatched the forced return to work.

Second, it is necessary to understand clearly the role of the unions, which are not "working class organizations," but arms of corporate management and the state, controlled by affluent upper middle class executives whose interests are hostile to those of the workers they claim to represent.

One recent episode is particularly telling. In July 2015 CWA President Chris Shelton went to the White House along with the leaders of the United Steelworkers, the United Auto Workers and other unions for a discussion with President Obama. At the time, various media outlets and government think tanks were warning of a "wages push" by American workers anxious to reverse the decline in real wages after the full recovery of corporate profits, the stock market and CEO pay after the Great Recession. It is clear that the White House meeting discussed how to contain this danger with some 5 million workers coming up for new contracts in 2015-16.

What followed was the systematic sabotage by the AFL-CIO and Change to Win labor federations of any united struggle by workers against Obama's economic policy. The chief reason the CWA did not call Verizon workers out on strike when their contract expired in August 2015 was because this coincided with the expiration of contracts for 30,000 steelworkers, 140,000 autoworkers and others. Through a combination of extended contracts, lies and intimidation, the unions separated these workers and imposed deals that held total labor cost increases to below the rate of inflation.

When the CWA finally called a walkout eight months later, Verizon workers had exhausted their savings for a strike and the company had hired and trained a small army of strikebreakers.

Despite this, Verizon workers fought a determined battle, defying violence by strikebreakers and police, court injunctions and a blackout by the corporate-controlled media. But the organizations that claimed to represent them, the CWA and IBEW, conspired to isolate the strike and starve workers into submission. In order to prevent a telecommunications strike on both coasts, the CWA forced 16,000 AT&T West workers continue working without a contract and quickly shut down a local strike in San Diego before it spread throughout California.

As the Verizon strike has demonstrated, workers are in a

struggle not only against a particularly ruthless corporation, Verizon, but a whole class of capitalist owners and the political system that defends them. These struggles are increasingly taking the form of a clash between rank-and-file workers and the official trade unions.

In the US, the support for Sanders—a self-described "democratic socialist"—exposes the lie that American workers and youth will never seek a political alternative to the capitalist system. While the American ruling class has nothing to fear from Sanders, who has sought to contain popular anger within the safe channels of the Democratic Party, the corporate and financial oligarchy has a great deal to fear from the reemergence of class conflict and the growing anti-capitalist sentiment among workers and youth.

In the course of the strike, as in previous struggles by autoworkers, teachers and other sections of workers, Verizon workers increasingly turned to the *World Socialist Web Site* and its *WSWS Verizon Strike Newsletter* to learn the truth, express their concerns and demands, and for a strategy to expand their struggle. Thousands of workers have circulated the newsletter and hundreds have participated in online conferences and supported a petition to demand the rescinding of the back-to-work order pending the release of the full contract and a democratic vote by the membership.

In every workplace workers need new organizations of struggle and self-representation. Rank-and-file committees, elected by and democratically controlled by the workers themselves, should be built to unify workers, establish lines of communication between different industries and public sectors, and organize a common fight back in defense of wages, health care and other social rights.

The Socialist Equality Party is fighting to build a new revolutionary leadership to mobilize the working class in a political struggle against the big business parties and the capitalist system, which is the cause of social inequality, poverty and war.



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