

CWA seeks to divert Maximus struggle behind Democratic Party

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Following the layoff of 700 call center workers by federal contractor Maximus last month, workers went on one-day strike Monday in Bogalusa, Louisiana; Hattiesburg, Mississippi; Riverview and Tampa, Florida; Chester, Virginia; and London, Kentucky.

Organized by the Communication Workers of America (CWA) and its subsidiary, Call Center Workers United (CCWU), the workers' demands included protection from future layoffs, a wage increase from the average of \$16.20 an hour to \$25 an hour, and opportunities for career advancement.

Indicating the unserious nature of the Maximus strike, which was another one-off public relations stunt similar to the ones the CWA has been holding since last year, were the instructions given to workers at the pre-strike meetings. Workers were told to not use the word "recognize" or "picket" in chants or on signs, to "not describe this action as 'picket' or 'picket line,'" to "not put signs on wooden sticks, especially near the work site," and to "not walk around, march, or pace back and forth if action is held at the place of work." (!)

Instead of mobilizing an all-out fight to win workers' demands, the entire orientation of the CWA is to the Democratic Party. In multiple reports coauthored by the CWA over the past two years detailing the corrupt practices of Maximus, the union has time and again attempted to peddle the lie that the Democratic Party—a party of Wall Street and the Pentagon—can be pushed to defend workers interests.

An internal meeting was held before the strike on Sunday, and a press conference was held over Zoom after the strike, featuring Democratic politicians and top level union officials. The meeting organizers provided only a limited space for workers to share experiences about their working and living conditions and raise issues. In reality, the main purpose of the meetings, conducted by CWA organizers, was to try to sow illusions that the union apparatus would conduct a serious fight.

There is a yawning chasm between the determination of workers to fight and the CWA's bankrupt perspective of pressuring the Democrats. Those workers who were able to speak at the press conference provided a glimpse of the difficult conditions facing workers in the industry, conditions that are not just unique to the United States, but global.

One worker, a dual customer service representative (CSR) who handles calls for the Affordable Care Act (ACA) Marketplace and Medicare (both under the Department of Health and Human Services), said that she only received a 70-cent raise when she took on the added responsibility of handling another call line. "So, I'm doing two people's jobs in one person, and only getting 70 cents is not any kind of raise in my opinion."

She continued: "Maximus treats us like we're replaceable, like we don't matter. And that's exactly how they're paying us, like they don't care, because they care more about their pockets than giving us what we need to survive. So, at first, the whole strike thing scared me to death because I was afraid of losing my job, but we've got to fight for what we deserve.

"We're working 40 hours to line their pockets. They're paying us their leftovers. And that's exactly how it feels."

Another dual CSR, a single mother of four that has been working at the company for five years, said, "Right now we're just hanging on by a thread. I have to pay out of pocket for health care coverage because the deductibles are so high at Maximus, and I've been living paycheck by paycheck with garnishments, which literally has made it impossible to just live. Even though I work full time, I've been bled out.

"I recently was faced with eviction and had to work out a payment plan with my landlord to make sure that me and my babies did not lose our home.

"We also went on strike to demand protection from unfair layoffs including at least 2 months' notice. Fortunately, I wasn't one of the 700 call workers that just got laid off but I can relate because I know what would happen if I was laid off—I'd be out on the streets."

She concluded by saying that "These layoffs don't make any sense. Maximus says it's because of overstaffing, but I've noticed increased call volume in every line of business, including since the layoffs. Last week was the first week after layoffs and I was asked to work overtime."

If workers fear company retaliation, the blame falls squarely on the CWA, which is refusing to mobilize its entire membership to strike alongside Maximus call center workers. This is the same playbook used by union bureaucracies around the world—to isolate workers from one another so as to prevent

separate struggles from linking up, especially across different sectors of industry, when what is needed is a unified fight against the corporations.

Proving this point, at no time during the two meetings was there any mention of a strike by hundreds of journalists for Gannett publications taking place on the same day as the Maximus strike. The journalists, also members of the NewsGuild-CWA, struck in Florida, as well as five other states across the country.

While Gannett, the largest newspaper chain in the country, has also laid off hundreds over the past year and closed dozens of publications since 2019, the financial motives of the NewsGuild-CWA, whose “General Fund owns 1,590 shares of Gannett,” also made imperative that its 1,000-plus members did not join in struggle with their Maximus brothers and sisters.

According to the most recent Department of Labor filings, the CWA sits atop \$400 million in net assets. While paying out \$0 in strike benefits, it dished out \$9.5 million for “political activities and lobbying” last year.

The post-strike press conference featured more CWA lobbying and political hobnobbing with the Democratic Party. The featured speakers included CWA Secretary Treasurer Sara Steffens along with Tennessee state representative Gloria Johnson, Florida state representative Maxwell Frost, and Reverend Dr. William J. Barber of the Poor People’s Campaign.

This is all in line with the broader social makeup and political character of the CWA apparatus as a whole, which reflects the bureaucratized and corporatist nature of the entire AFL-CIO and its international counterparts.

Steffens, who took home \$200,000 last year, used her slot to restate the talking points of the strike organizers, emphasizing the main demand advanced by the CWA bureaucrats on the eve of the strike—that Maximus should come to the table to “listen to” workers’ demands and that “the Department of Health and Human Services and Secretary [Xavier] Becerra take immediate action” to “investigate Maximus’s unacceptable labor practices.”

This is a repetition of the previous petitions authored by the CCWU and addressed to HHS Secretary Becerra, pleading with him to “Tell Maximus to rehire our laid-off coworkers.”

A previous report coauthored by the CWA concluded with an open letter dated March 8, 2020, “Paid For By CWA” and addressed to CEO Bruce Caswell, among others, calling on Maximus “to treat your employees with dignity and to respect their legal right to free association.”

Amid raging inflation, an ever-increasing raft of bipartisan austerity measures implemented against the working class, and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine which is spiraling towards a nuclear third world war, the ruling class and its political agents in the trade union bureaucracies and pseudo-left organizations fear above all a politically independent struggle of the working class, unified across all sectors of industry

against social inequality and its root cause, the capitalist system.

One of the CWA’s most prominent members is Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants–Communications Workers of America. A featured speaker at the 2022 Labor Notes Conference, when responding to audience members demanding a new working class party outside of the official two-party system, Nelson replied that “If we start seeing ourselves as a working class, then we don’t need a party. The party [Democrats, as well as Republicans] will come to us.”

Maximus workers should reject the class collaborationist strategy of the union bureaucracy, break free of its reins, and take the struggle forward against the company according to their own independent class interests, none of which the CWA nor its partners in its Strategic Organizing Center fight for.

Maximus is a multi-billion dollar and multinational corporation. The one-off protest stunts organized by the CWA are meant to serve as a release valve for pent up opposition among the rank and file.

To win their fight Maximus workers must organize independently of the CWA apparatus and formulate their own demands based on what they need, not what the CWA says is acceptable or “realistic.” This should include the immediate reinstatement of all workers fired and opposition to any future layoffs. Maximus workers should also be paid the same as federal workers who do the same work, and all call center workers should receive immediate cost-of-living raises tied to the rate of inflation.

Most importantly, Maximus workers must recognize that their struggle is one of many of the ongoing class battles being actively waged by the working class against the ruling class internationally, a fact covered over by the union bureaucrats and their pseudo-left flunkies.

In opposition to the CWA’s sabotage of their fight, Maximus workers need to take matters into their own hands by establishing rank-and-file committees in each workplace. These committees, democratically run and politically independent of the union, should issue and fight for workers’ needs in concert with the struggles waged by workers in other industries in the US and around the world.



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