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Tensions mount as Verizon strike continues

By our reporters
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As a strike by 39,000 Verizon workers on the US East Coast enters its fourth day, there are reports of service delays in repairs and installations for new customers. The company typically does 30-35,000 new installations a week.

Striking workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that they were determined to continue the struggle in the face of open strikebreaking by the company, which has trained 20,000 nonunion management personnel as replacements and is planning to employ them seven days a week.

Verizon service technicians and customer service representatives are opposing cuts to their pensions and health care as well as a management demand to be able to transfer workers long distances with little or no advance notice. The Communication Workers of America (CWA) and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) called the strike after forcing members to stay on the job eight months without a contract. In the intervening period the company made extensive preparations.

The strike is the largest in years and is an expression of the enormous class tensions lying beneath the surface of American society. One indication of that came Wednesday when a supervisor allegedly struck a striking worker with his vehicle while crossing the picket line. The incident happened at 7am on North Frederick Avenue near a Verizon facility. The worker was taken to a nearby hospital with non-life-threatening injuries. No charges have been filed at this point.

The walkout comes as Verizon continues to post record profits—\$39 billion over the last three years. Despite this, the CWA earlier this year offered massive concessions, \$200 million by one report, which the company rejected.

The company's insistence on the right to transfer workers appears aimed at driving out older, better-paid workers in order to replace them with lower-paid contractors.

The striking workers are employed at the company's wire line business, which includes landline phone service and fiber optic network that provide video, phone and Internet service. The CWA has not been able to organize Verizon's wireless service, which has been growing while its landline division shrinks.

A veteran Verizon worker from New York told the WSWWS, “Our CEO Lowell McAdams said we don't compete with Comcast and Time Warner, we have our own turf. He made it clear that Verizon is colluding with them. For example, in Co-Op City in the Bronx they have no intention of putting in fiber optic cable because they don't want to compete. It is not a racial thing; they are just not interested in going toe-to-toe with these companies. They are letting things rot in the rural areas as well, because it is just not profitable.”

He added, “McAdam's favorite phrase is ‘shareholder value.’ It is clear that everything is based on how much we can give back to the shareholders—it must imbue our entire culture. Customer service is just an afterthought. I hear from other workers that it doesn't make sense; it is just the naked pursuit of profit.

“For example, with cost cutting, field installers can't get screws. They might actually have to go to Home Depot to buy them. Then there was the case of workers who got suspended for idling their vehicle for three minutes to stay warm on a cold winter's day.”

When asked why he felt the unions decided to call a strike now, after eight months of working without a contract, he said, “Everyone is scratching their heads. People were prepared to strike last August. They had saved money. They were ready. People now were not ready.

“There is a lot of frustration about going back to work in 2011 without a contract. People would just be furious if we went back again with nothing.”

The CWA timed the strike to coincide with the New York Democratic presidential primary. The CWA is coordinating the strike closely with the presidential campaign of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, a Democrat. Sanders joined a CWA picket line on Wednesday, and about 150 strikers later attended a mass Sanders rally at Washington Square Park in New York City.

The CWA has endorsed Sanders and is promoting the illusion that Democratic politicians will come to the aid of striking workers. At the same time, the strident economic nationalism promoted by Sanders is in line with the CWA's denunciations of Verizon for outsourcing jobs to the Philippines, Mexico and other low wage countries. Such rhetoric both serves to divide Verizon workers from their brothers and sisters overseas and lays the basis for ever-greater concessions in the name of helping management "compete" globally.

The CWA's main preoccupation is to gain access to Verizon's expanding wireless division, which would represent a huge potential expansion of the union's dues income. To accomplish that goal it is willing to use workers' wages and benefits as bargaining chips. This is indicated by the fact that the union appears now to be downplaying other issues such as cuts to pensions and health care.

Since the 2000 strike, betrayed by the CWA, Verizon has eliminated 40 percent of its workforce. In 2011 the CWA ended the strike after two weeks without a contract, before it had to issue strike pay.

Talks continued for another year before the CWA and IBEW accepted most of Verizon's concession demands. These included increased health insurance co-pays and a wage increase below the rate of inflation. New hires no longer receive a defined benefit pension plan, and workers hired since 2003 are not protected from layoff. Workers who retired after 2012 would no longer have their health care benefits covered by the company.

The Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service played a role in imposing that agreement on workers. It has indicated its willingness to become involved in the present dispute, although the unions have so far deflected calls for mediation.

A WSWS reporting team spoke to striking Verizon workers on the picket line in New York City. Dennis, a field technician with 20 years of experience, said, "The main issue in this strike is job security. It is clear that Verizon is trying to outsource this work to the Philippines. The company is also bringing in outside

contractors, and it is clear that they want nonunion workers.

"Things have also been getting worse. While it is all right at my location, I have heard stories of guys getting suspended for 30 days for minor infractions, like not having a specific card on them. When I first started working for a company, which was absorbed by Verizon, it felt like we were a family. Now everything is business."

Asked about his thoughts on the CWA and the 2011 strike, Dennis added, "I feel like our base salary has gone down because they made us pay more into medical. Now we are out because the union said that we are at an impasse. I believe the union tried giving the company some concessions, but the company held up negotiations.

The WSWS also spoke with Jim, who was picketing outside a Verizon building in Bowdoin Square, Boston. "The anxiety is there. Outsourcing work is the biggest issue for me. They can transfer people across the country or even out of the country. Call centers can be set up anywhere."

The WSWS raised the point that workers had to unite globally and not allow the companies to pit workers in the United States against the brothers internationally. "I agree with that," Jim replied.

He added, "There are other issues with retirees threatened with losing their health care. And there are issues here too; everyone who is walking the picket line could lose their health care because of the strike."

"They are in there right now with replacement workers, either managers from other areas or replacement workers they have trained. I don't think they can train a person for a month or two and they can do our jobs. It is too complicated."

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