

COMMENT

USA on strike: A high-stakes fight at Verizon

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The strike at Verizon is one of the labor movement's biggest battles in many years. Here, a Verizon worker and member of CWA Local 1106 explains what's involved.

VERIZON COMMUNICATIONS has made its message clear: It isn't interested in bargaining, only in getting as much as it can from the unions.

Some 45,000 members of the Communication Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) are on the picket lines from Massachusetts to Virginia after the unions' contract with the telecommunications giant expired at midnight on Sunday.

This contract fight is not about money. Based on what it has taken in so far, Verizon's revenues for this year are estimated at more than \$108 billion. Net profits last year were \$6 billion. Verizon's top five executives alone received compensation of \$258 million over the past four years.

The company's demands—which have not changed since negotiations began in June—would hollow out union power at the company, gutting health care, pensions, sick days, overtime pay and job security. Verizon wants to make union members pay 25 percent of their health care costs through a high-deductible plan to replace one where workers have paid nothing until now, and it wants to further weaken the CWA's and IBEW's ability to defend their members.

"In the end, they want to take away our union," said Melissa, a shop steward for CWA Local 1101 said on the picket line at Verizon's headquarters in lower Manhattan. "The new Verizon CEO, who used to run AT&T, is from Texas. He doesn't want a union workplace."

The strikers are technicians and customer support employees in Verizon's wire lines division providing Internet and land phone lines. Verizon's giant wireless division is, however, mostly nonunion.

This struggle is rightly being called the Wisconsin of the private sector—in reference to the showdown earlier this year over Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker's attack on collective bargaining rights for public-sector workers.

According to the company's propaganda, technicians make over \$100,000 a year plus benefits, but the reality is that hourly employees can only reach that level by working massive overtime—if it's even available. The top base wage is \$77,000 a year, which lags well behind profit growth, and a majority of workers earn far less.

"The CEO makes \$55,000 a day, but they expect us to give back, when a lot of us don't even make \$55,000 in a year," said another striking worker in Manhattan.

THIS FIGHT is about the power of unions to protect jobs. Underlying Verizon's attack is the same

logic at work in the assault on public-sector workers. Political leaders across the country are attempting to pit taxpayers against government workers with claims that state budget crises are the result of fat pensions and paychecks of teachers and firefighters.

In the same way, Verizon management wants to pit union and non-union workers at the company against each other—as if our benefits would come out of the wages of the unorganized, not their gargantuan profits. Ironically, Verizon is one of the giant U.S. corporations that dodged paying any taxes at all for the last two years—and therefore contributed to government deficits at every level.

The remaining workforce on the copper landline side of Verizon enjoys the fruits of decades of union struggle—no health care premiums; fixed benefit pensions, which pay out regardless of the ups and downs of the stock market; and mostly iron-clad job security for those hired before 2004.

But these workers are now only 30 percent of Verizon's employees. The majority are non-union, at-will workers with much lower pay and benefits.

This is the trend throughout U.S. industry. Corporations and political leaders have been pushing the line that no group of workers should enjoy any special "privileges"—like a secure retirement, for example—and they're trying to take advantage of the fact that the Great Recession has destroyed the livelihoods of so many. But this is the rankest hypocrisy considering that former Verizon CEO Ivan Seidenberg took home \$81 million last year.

The fight at Verizon, which is the largest labor movement battle in several years, could galvanize the sentiment that working people have given back enough already—and pick up where the struggle Wisconsin left off last winter.

But we're in for a hard fight. The union lacks the leverage it held in the last contract round in 2009 when Verizon was still building its fiber optic network (FiOS). Instead of striking then, when the situation was in favor of the union, we worked without a contract and took unnecessary concessions. Bitterness about this drives many union members' view that we need to strike until we win in this round.

Whether the company would accept any return to work that isn't a complete surrender has yet to be seen. All indications are that Verizon wanted this strike to shove massive concessions down our throats, while bankrupting the CWA and IBEW and demoralizing the membership. It has already flown out-of-state, non-union employees from Verizon Business to New York City to cross picket lines—and it is setting up to shift calls to non-union call centers.

In light of the company's aggressive stance, the CWA's announcement that it is willing to return to the negotiating table as soon as Verizon takes its all-or-nothing offer off the table is disconcerting. The union is in a weak position on a number of fronts—IBEW locals don't have strike funds, and many members don't earn enough to have personal savings to weather a long strike. But working without a contract after walking out would make beating back concessions an uphill battle.

If the CWA and IBEW are going to capitalize on widespread bitterness with corporate and political power that Wisconsin exposed, there will need to be a public, militant, broad-based fight that connects to the struggle of other working people. This will require picket lines that are more than symbolic, and that get active support from other unions. It will also require unions getting out of their comfort zones of hotel conference rooms and judges' chambers—and back into the streets.

The first days of picketing have shown that the energy and anger is there. Now it's time to organize for the long haul.

P.S.

* From Socialist Worker (USA).