

US telecommunications workers continue strike against Verizon

By our correspondent
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Negotiations continued Tuesday between unions representing 87,000 striking telecommunication workers and Verizon Communications. The strike by 72,000 workers represented by the Communication Workers of America (CWA) and another 15,000 represented by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) began on Sunday morning. The strike effects Verizon in 12 states along the East Coast from Virginia to Maine and Washington, D.C.

Differences over job security and the union representation of workers at Verizon's non-union operations, particularly its wireless division, remain the principal issues. Other issues, such as forced overtime and working conditions, also remain unresolved.

On Monday the CWA reported that many of these issues were settled in a proposal presented by the company 15 minutes before the expiration of the old contract at 12:01 Sunday morning.

Verizon was formed in June by the merger of Bell Atlantic and GTE. While Bell Atlantic was heavily unionized, much of the former GTE was not. The company at first demanded the right to move six percent of its jobs, since reduced to four percent, to non-union areas.

Another job issue is the demand that Verizon stop shifting work from its core company to a subsidiary known as BACCSI (Bell Atlantic Communications and Construction Services Inc.) BACCSI was formed five years ago by Bell Atlantic and operates in New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia and the District of Columbia.

Two years ago, the CWA won representation rights at BACCSI following a strike against Bell Atlantic. Workers at BACCSI receive less than half the wages and benefits of workers at the core company doing comparable jobs. The current dispute focuses only on

which job functions the CWA will permit BACCSI to perform.

“We never should have allowed Bell Atlantic to set up BACCSI,” said an installer in the Pittsburgh region. “They have been doing our work; when they break something, we have to go and fix it. They are getting a fraction of our wages and learning to do our jobs. All the time the union is collecting dues from both of us.”

The rest of the telecommunication industry is carefully watching the outcome of this conflict. Contracts between the CWA and AT&T, Bell South, SBC and US West all expire next year.

During the past 15 years the number and percentage of unionized workers have fallen dramatically. From more than 700,000 unionized workers in 1984 the telecommunication industry now has a little over 400,000 today.

AT&T, the largest long distance company, had 300,000 CWA members in 1984. Today it has only 36,400, or 25 percent of its 148,000 workers. MCI-Worldcom, the second largest long distance company and the largest carrier of Internet traffic, is completely non-union. Sprint is only 13 percent unionized and Nextel, VoiceStream and US Cellular are entirely non-union.

The CWA is seeking to represent most of the 32,000 workers at Verizon Wireless, which is seen as the fastest growing sector of the company. It is the largest provider of wireless services in the US with 33 million customers.

Most of the automated network continues to operate, but operator assistance is unavailable and Verizon is recommending that its customers wait until the end of the dispute before seeking new or additional service or to speak to a representative about billing problems. Some 30,000 management personnel have been filling

in.

On Monday, the first full day of picketing, thousands of workers marched and chanted slogans outside 540 Verizon offices and work locations throughout the region. Some 800 technicians in New Jersey, members of the IBEW, joined the strike after the company took disciplinary action against them because they refused to cross a CWA picket line.

A Pennsylvania court issued an injunction prohibiting union members from being within 200 feet of any Verizon building and limited pickets to four, spaced 10 feet apart. Similar orders have been issued in Delaware and New York.

Verizon is the largest provider of local and wireless service in the United States and is a major provider of telecommunication services internationally. The company has 63 million access lines going into 33 million households in 31 states, plus Washington, D.C. and Puerto Rico, and 25 million wireless lines with a presence in all 50 states, D.C. and Puerto Rico.

The new company is also a major provider of long distance and data services. The company operates in over 40 countries and is a major owner of several global fiber optic networks.

In addition to the workers who have walked out, another 24,000 workers at Verizon represented by the CWA and 15,000 by the IBEW are not on strike. These workers are in areas formerly run by GTE. Their contracts have not expired.

A reporter from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to striking Verizon workers in New York City on the second day of the strike.

One worker, Margie Riley, 18 years at the company, who works in inside wiring, commented:

“The major issue is job security. This is because the future is in the wireless technology, and the company doesn't want the union to represent the workers in that field. They need union representation, and it is critical for us as well.

“They want to contract New York work outside of New York, and utilize workers with a lower rate of pay. That is, the company does not want to pay workers union wages. In addition, they want give-backs from us on such things as health and retirement benefits. They are offering us nothing in the way of wages.

“After the 17-week strike in 1989, we established a pretty decent relationship with NYNEX. Things

changed dramatically when Bell Atlantic took over. They have been very hostile to us, and they clearly want to break the union.

“Their merger with GTE to create Verizon allows them to greatly increase their long distance market. They are probably bigger than AT&T.”

Andres Caban, field technician, with five years at the company, told our reporter:

“I am upset that the Teamsters are allowing their members to cross our picket line and deliver packages, especially when our union supported their strike. We refused to give United Parcel Service any technical telephone support when their workers walked out.

“The two major issues in this strike are contracting out, and our need to organize the Verizon wireless workers. By making it hard for us to unionize these workers, they are showing that they want to bust the union.

“Although right now less than half of the business is in wireless, it is a rapidly growing field. In a few years, it will be the majority of the company. We want the wireless workers to enjoy the same wages and benefits that we have. Right now, they make a lot less than we do.

“This company is making money hand over fist, but they don't want to share it with us. With this merger, they claim that they need to cut jobs. They want to eliminate six percent of the workforce. That would mean laying off 4,000 workers.”

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