

“Five percent of the population will be wealthy, with everyone else fighting for food”

Verizon strikers denounce health care cut-off, court injunctions

By a WSWS reporting team
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The World Socialist Web Site urges Verizon workers and supporters to write in with your comments and experiences and download and distribute our latest statement. To sign up for the Verizon strike newsletter, click here.

Verizon has sent letters to all 45,000 striking workers in the US informing them that they will lose health care and other benefits if they don't return to work by September 1. The move is intended to place further pressure on strikers to return to work.

Striking workers will still be eligible for health care through the federally mandated health insurance program, COBRA if they pay for it themselves. Coverage for a family under COBRA runs an average of \$15,000 a year and can be greater for many reasons.

Verizon, which has made \$3 billion in profits so far this year, is demanding massive concessions from the workers including: freezing pensions for current workers and abolishing them for new employees; eliminating two paid holidays; abolishing all job security provisions; and forcing workers to pay \$1,300 to \$3,000 for health insurance on top of a \$3,000 deductible.

While striking workers have expressed their determination to oppose these concession demands, both the CWA and the IBEW union officials have made clear that they are willing to call off the strike without any agreement on the withdrawal of concession demands, saying only that the company must “bargain fairly.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* continues its interviews and discussions with striking workers, with reports from New York City, New York and Philadelphia, Wilkes-Barre and Scranton, Pennsylvania.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

As part of its strike-breaking campaign, Verizon has mobilized the state against workers, including winning a series of injunctions severely limiting picketing. The FBI has also announced an investigation into unsubstantiated charges from the company of “sabotage.”

Brian, a service technician for six years at Verizon, denounced these measures. “Since this is a free country we should be able to picket; we haven't been violent. The FBI is just wasting taxpayers

dollars. They are not going to find anything. We aren't doing any kind of vandalism; we are just fighting a guy who makes \$55,000 a day.

The board of directors voted for executives and theirs to get lifetime health care, he added. “We just want the same respect. We're the ones that built this company.

“The government is so corrupt now. When is everyone going to take a stand against it? It just seems that there are a few percentage of people in the United States that are making all the money, just like at Verizon where the top five executives made over \$285 million in the last four years. It just seems like five percent of the population will be wealthy, with everyone else fighting for food.”

Marjorie, a database administrator for 18 years, said that the injunctions were to limit the strength of the workers. “Of course in numbers there is strength, so they don't want too much hoopla.”

Verizon wants to “keep flushing out the middle people,” she added, “and we are the one that bring the company its money. They're making billions in profit and you want to take away people's pensions and you want to mess with their health care. The economy is in a collapsed state right now. Nobody can afford anything, we are living paycheck to paycheck now.”

New York City

Melissa, a field technician with 17 years at Verizon said that until they started receiving strike pay in another two weeks, they were just doing their best to make that last paycheck stretch. “The union bosses don't want to pay \$200 a week multiplied by 45,000 workers for the third and fourth week, and it goes up to \$300 a week after that. That puts them under pressure to wrap it up before we become eligible for strike pay.”

She thought the claims of sabotage were “just the company's way of making us look bad. Especially after weather like Sunday” when a record rainfall of nearly eight inches flooded roads, disrupted transit and caused power outages across New York City. “There will be hundreds of lines down and no one to fix them.”

Karen has worked for Verizon for 19 years and is the daughter of a retired Verizon worker. She said they were fighting for their future. “My father was out 7-8 months back in 1989 to fight to keep their medical benefits. I know that I am fortunate to have this job, but I need my medical. I've got kids and pay \$15 co-pays

every time we go to the doctor.

“We don’t get Christmas bonuses, we don’t have yachts like they do,” she said, gesturing to the new Goldman Sachs office building towering over the picket line in downtown Manhattan. “We would even live without any wage increase for a couple of years if we had to, but Verizon isn’t hurting. It’s been making a profit every year. It’s not fair that they make us make sacrifices when they aren’t.

“And Verizon is even picking up the tab for all the police overtime!” Melissa added.

Both Melissa and Karen thought that the company had used the consolidation of the so-called “baby-Bells” and MCI ten years ago (when Verizon was created) as a way to lay off workers and drive down wages. “They’re still getting rid of the remaining MCI workers.”

Ronaldo, a central office technician with more than 29 years agreed. “Every time we had a name change, there were layoffs. When they took over GTE/Sprint it was a right-to-work Texas based company. But the change to Verizon has been the worst in terms of layoffs. This division used to have 80,000 employees; it is now down to 45,000.”

He said that Verizon was not letting the strike get media coverage, probably threatening to withhold advertising from the major networks and newspapers. “The networks were out here the first day with cameras, but now there’s hardly anything. There was a demonstration of a few hundred building trades workers at the World Trade Center construction site and they covered that, but when we had thousands demonstrating support for us just a block away, nothing. They’ve even gotten injunctions to prevent us from filming what has been going on and posting it on YouTube ourselves.”

He said earlier in the morning the NYPD terrorism squad cars had been lined up in front of the picket line located a block away from the World Trade Center site. He thought the city would put pressure to wrap the strike up because they didn’t want to pay overtime to the NYPD. He added that there was no proof of sabotage and that it was outrageous that the strikers were being labeled terrorists.

Wilkes-Barre and Scranton, PA

Scranton and Wilkes-Barre, together with surrounding towns in northeastern Pennsylvania, form the state’s third largest metropolitan area after Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

Gary has worked for Verizon for 15 years in the Scranton area. He is a local steward for the Communications Workers of America and works in customer service. “What we have here is a company that made over \$1 billion last year trying to take advantage of the economy by cutting our wages and benefits.”

“The former CEO of the firm, Ivan Seidenberg, got a base salary of \$30 million, and something like \$130 million in total compensation.”

Referring to the mass protests last year in Wisconsin, Gary said, “Working people are under attack everywhere. This is the Wisconsin of the East Coast.”

“We’re not going to give up. We’re going to keep fighting.”

Gary was joined on the picket line by striking Verizon workers Kyle Kovaleski, David Cunningham, Mario Palmieri, and Dan

Pesanti.

“The culture of this country is that if you work for a living they tell you’ve got to accept the scraps off the table,” David said. “People deserve much better than that.”

Dan pointed to the role the unions had played in the history of the US in raising living standards. A reporter for the WSWS pointed out that those struggles in the 1930s came into conflict with the state and the courts, just as the Verizon workers are experiencing, and that they were inspired and led by socialists and socialist-minded workers. What was needed was a new political perspective, he said, that fights for the independent interests of workers.

The five young workers said they felt they are taking a stand for the whole working class. “Everywhere you’ve got companies cutting costs, using the economy as an excuse,” Mario said. “The CEOs and the big stockholders are making so much money. It’s all you see everywhere. It’s a trend.”

On Monday the WSWS spoke with two striking workers picketing outside of a Verizon shop in Wilkes-Barre. Both members of the CWA, Pat had 13 years’ experience and Tom three years.

The two workers said that for them, the most critical issue in the strike was jobs.

“The CEO of the company makes 190 times as much in a day as the average Verizon worker makes in a year. But it’s not just the pay. The contract they’re trying to push through would outsource 30 percent of our jobs,” Pat said.

The Scranton and Wilkes-Barre area has the highest unemployment rate in the state of Pennsylvania.

Tom said, “A lot of people are sympathetic. A few days ago we had a rally here in town and about 200 people showed up. But some people think we should be happy just to have jobs. This isn’t just about us. If we lose our jobs it’s not going to help anyone here. Some people say we should just take whatever they offer, just to have a job. But I want to be able to feed and care for my family.”

Pat interjected, “It’s not just a matter of the contract between the CWA and Verizon. It’s about living standards. People don’t know the history of the last 100 years in this area.”

The Scranton and Wilkes-Barre region was for a century a major coal-producing area, a bastion of the United Mine Workers (UMW), and the scene of bloody class conflict, including the Latimer Massacre (1897) and the hanging of the Molly Maguires (1877).

“I was just talking about the breaker boys,” continued Pat, whose family has lived in the area for generations. “Those were the little kids they used to make work in the mines. That’s what we’re going back to in this country.”

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