US union leaders split ranks of striking telecom workers

A correspondent
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The Communication Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) ordered 50,000 workers in New York and New England to end their walkout Monday and abandon 37,000 co-workers who remain on strike against Verizon Communications in five mid-Atlantic states and the District of Columbia. The virtual strike-breaking move, organized by the unions themselves, is a brazen betrayal of the workers who remain on strike in Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, Maryland, West Virginia and Washington, DC. It undermines their resistance to the telecommunication giant's demands for forced overtime, speed-up and downsizing.

The tentative agreement reached Sunday night covers 50,000 CWA and IBEW workers who formerly worked for NYNEX. The remaining workers had previously worked for Bell Atlantic. NYNEX was absorbed by Bell Atlantic, which then merged with GTE this summer to form Verizon—the nation's largest local and wireless phone provider.

The splitting of the strikers is a violation of the most elemental tenet of working class solidarity. It has long been a basic tenet of industrial struggles that workers walk out together and return together. This was done to prevent management reprisals against militant workers and to maintain uniformity of conditions. This tradition, like every other aspect of trade union militancy and working class solidarity, has been under sustained attack by the American trade union bureaucracy for the last two decades.

On Monday morning CWA workers still on strike in New Jersey and other states traveled to New York City, where the workers had been told to return to work by CWA officials, and set up picket lines outside Verizon facilities. CWA shop stewards ordered reticent workers to cross their co-workers' picket lines. Within hours, with the assistance of the union, the company was rerouting calls to directory assistance, repair and business offices from the strikebound mid-Atlantic states to New York and New England, sabotaging the ongoing strike at other Verizon facilities.

This betrayal produced considerable discontent among workers with the CWA bureaucracy. In an effort to dissipate rank-and-file opposition, CWA President Morton Bahr announced that picketing by Verizon strikers from the mid-Atlantic states would be extended throughout New York state Wednesday, and instructed members to honor picket lines. With unbridled cynicism Bahr said, “The concept that an injury to one is an injury to all has been central to the principles of trade unionism since the days of the Knights of Labor, and it's just as true and basic to organized labor in the twenty-first century.” Not surprisingly, the promised widespread picketing did not materialize and the vast majority of CWA workers continued to work.

In Pittsburgh, a striking technician with 22 years of service told th*e World Socialist Web Site*, “This is a betrayal. We are supposed to be one union. They put us out on a limb. Now they are cutting it off. We have no say-so on what's going on.”

CWA officials conducted themselves with typical disregard for the democratic rights of their members. In New York and New England workers had no opportunity to study the details of the tentative agreement, let alone vote on the deal. Many of the CWA workers—both those ordered back to work and those who remained on strike—had not even been aware that the union had split the membership into two separate bargaining units.

As crude as this betrayal is, it comes as no surprise to anyone who has followed the record of the CWA and the AFL-CIO more generally. The present case recalls the treachery of the United Food and Commercial Workers against strikers at Hormel in 1985-86 and the United Auto Workers at Caterpillar. The internal strikebreaking by the CWA is the latest demonstration that the AFL-CIO unions are organically incapable of defending the interests of the working class. A protracted political degeneration and bureaucratization has transformed these organizations into corporatist arms of management.

CWA President Morton Bahr apparently issued the back-to-work order after negotiators for CWA-South did not accept the deal agreed to by officials representing the New York and New England region. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, people close to the negotiations said Bahr was “extremely unhappy” when they did not sign a deal. CWA-South is reportedly demanding that the company cut the level of mandatory overtime to about 8 hours a week, from the current 10-15 hours a week allowed in the contract. The unit is also calling for a reduction in the monitoring of call-center workers, who are driven to exhaustion by present workloads.

The full details of the contract have not been released, but one thing is certain: any agreement obtained on the basis of such a betrayal can only be detrimental to the interests of the workers, not only the former Bell Atlantic workers, but the NYNEX workers as well. Any short term gains, such as wage increases, are obtained at the cost of the long term interests of the Verizon workers and the working class as a whole. The blow delivered by the CWA to workers' unity will sooner rather than later have devastating consequences for all Verizon workers, as the company exploits them to press ahead ruthlessly with its plans for downsizing, cost-cutting and speedup. Moreover, the bureaucracy's trashing of working class solidarity can only sew confusion and passivity and promote among workers the narrow egotism and opportunism that is the hallmark of trade union officialdom.

An examination of the details of the contract that have been made public show that management has enlisted the assistance of the union in implementing the most important policy changes needed by the company to increase productivity and boost profits. Under the new contract the union will assist management in the destruction of at least several thousand jobs, and a further worsening of working conditions.

Verizon's President Lawrence Babbio said the proposed agreement would give the company the “flexibility we need to thrive in a highly-competitive, national marketplace” and allow it to “raise our standards and productivity.” Wall Street investors also greeted the deal by bidding up Verizon shares by 69 cents Monday.

The new contract allows Verizon to move 0.7 percent of the workforce, or about 800 workers, each year of the three-year contract to nonunion areas of the company. Verizon management wants to consolidate its many customer call and network monitoring centers into a few mega-centers. The transfer of 800 workers annually would translate into the closure of between 10 and 20 work centers a year.

Since the company will be limited in the number of centers it can move, management, with the assistance of the unions, will undoubtedly pit workers at different locations against each other over whose center to close. Moreover, these jobs are classified as those lost as the result of the merger. No limit has been placed on the destruction of jobs through what the company and the union call technological developments.

While the contract does not secure the jobs of workers, it does provide provisions to secure the interests of the CWA and IBEW bureaucracy, particularly in shoring up the union officials' sagging membership and dues base. The CWA has been granted an easier access to gaining representation of workers at Verizon's wireless division in the 12 states from Virginia to Maine and Washington DC that were affected by the strike.

Rather than have to go through the process of an election, Verizon agreed that it would recognize the union if more than half the workers signed cards agreeing to join the union. In the negotiations between Bahr and Babbio over the weekend, Verizon agreed to add several hundred workers at its retail stores into the agreement.

The union placed great emphasis on obtaining this agreement and they hope that it will set a pattern for negotiations between the CWA and AT&T and SBC next year. Wireless has proven to be one of the fastest growing and most profitable sectors of the telecommunication industry and the least unionized. Verizon wireless currently employees 32,000 workers of whom only 50 belong to a union. The agreement will reportedly allow card checks for one quarter of these workers, a smaller percentage than that obtained in the contract with SBC.

On the issue of job stress, faced especially by workers in the customer call centers, the new contract will grant customer service representatives 30 minutes a day during which time they will not have to be taking customer calls. Customer service representatives take orders for new and additional service, and handle billing questions and problems.

This equals less than 60 seconds per call during which time the customer service representatives will have to complete all notes in a customer's account, write any service orders or issue any billing credits that need processing and complete other related work.

Far from reducing stress, having the 30-minute time limit written into the contract will increase pressure on workers. In the past, the company would enforce such provisions through job performance ratings. This was bad enough since workers' ability to be transferred or promoted to a better job depended upon their performance rating. However, now that the provision is written into the contract workers who are not able to meet the 30-minute time limit will face disciplinary measures including suspension and firing.

Other details of the contract almost all deal with ways in which the company can increase productivity. Job classifications will be changed to reduce the number of workers needed to install high speed Internet access lines. Union members will be expected to complete the installation of DSL lines in one day, instead of the two days it sometimes takes when Verizon uses nonunion contractors to perform the tasks of each installation.

The company will have greater flexibility to transfer calls across regions to balance calling volume at call centers. Team-based incentive plans will be implemented in which workers can earn a 10 percent bonus. For the first time stock options are introduced as a portion of workers' pay, a measure used by many of Verizon's nonunion competitors to tie workers' income to improved profits for the company.