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Verizon strike goes national

By Don McIntosh
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America's biggest strike in four years has been under way since April 13, pitting 29,000 members of Communications Workers of America (CWA) and 10,000 members of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) against telecom giant Verizon. The strikers are customer service representatives and repair and installation technicians in Verizon's wireline division, which provides land-line phone service and fiber-optic internet and cable service in nine East Coast states — New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia — plus Washington, D.C.

CWA and IBEW are framing the strike as a struggle against corporate greed. Verizon, which the unions have begun calling "Verigreedy," made almost \$18 billion in profit in 2015, and gave lavish payouts



Portland Jobs with Justice organized a May 5 picket outside the downtown Portland Verizon Wireless store. Staff of IBEW Local 48 took part, as did members of CWA Local 7901 from Portland's First Unitarian Church.

to its top executives, including CEO Lowell McAdam, who made over \$18 million last year. Yet the company is demanding concessions from its union workers, including the right to require wireline technicians to work away from home for months at a time; an in-

crease in health-care costs for retirees; and a 30-year limit on pension service credit, for those of its workers who still have a pension (those hired since October 28, 2012, have only a 401(k) under the previ-

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PSU graduate assistants unionize

When it becomes official in about 3 weeks, PSU will have 800 new union members.

Graduate student employees are about to have a union at Portland State University. On May 5, the recently-formed Graduate Employees Union (GEU) turned in authorization cards signed by a majority of the school's 793 graduate student teaching, research, and administrative assistants to the Oregon Employment Relations Board. The state agency is expected to check the cards and certify the union, at which point grad student employees would begin getting ready to negotiate a first union contract with university administrators.

PSU would be the third public university in Oregon to have a graduate student employee



Jenn Mora and her fellow PSU graduate student assistants posted union-themed selfies in a social media campaign in support of their union drive.

union, after University of Oregon and Oregon State University. GEU is a joint project of the American Federation of Teachers and American Association of University Professors.

Union organizing committee member Andrés Oswill, a grad-

uate research assistant in the urban studies department, said the union is likely to push for improvements to insurance, compensation, and workload. PSU graduate assistants typically work part-time in exchange for tuition remission and a stipend that amounts to \$600 to \$700 a month after taxes — far below what it takes to live in Portland. And they're required to pay student fees and premiums for the student health insurance plan out of that.

"Even with a job on campus that's paying my tuition, I still have to take out loans to live," Oswill said.

Oswill said faculty supervisors and university administrators remained neutral toward the union effort during the three-month campaign, as mandated by a 2013 state law.

Will Google Fiber be laid union?

Google is ready to roll out a high-speed fiber-optic network in Portland. In March, it reached a deal with PGE and PacifiCorp to use their poles, and it requested a city land use permit to install its first 12-by-30-foot "fiber hut." Will it employ local union members at a living wage and benefits in its estimated \$300 million rollout?

Tracy Harness — chapter manager of the union-signatory contractors group Northwest Line Constructors, NECA — says at least five general contractors are submitting bids to manage the work: Henkels and McCoy, a union-signatory contractor that would employ IBEW members; Black and Veatch, and Kiewit, which sometimes employ union subcontractors; and Dycomm and Ericsson, which are not known to employ union labor.

In Kansas City, the first city to install Google fiber, the job has been done all-union, han-

dled by union-signatory Parr Electric. IBEW Local 53 Business Manager Stephen White says that has meant full-time work for about 150 members since 2012 — laying line and setting and changing out as many as 9,000 poles.

Travis Eri, business manager of Portland-based IBEW Local 125, is seeking to meet with Google managers to pitch the value of using the skilled union linemen who do pole work for PGE and PacifiCorp. It's also possible the work could go to members of IBEW Local 89 or 659, locals that represent telecom specialists.

Elsewhere, Google has installed fiber neighborhood by neighborhood, offering Internet at 40 times the speed of broadband for \$70 a month, cable television for an extra \$60, and "Fiber Phone" service for \$10 per month. If it goes forward in Portland, the work could start as early as this summer.

Workers to vote on union at PeaceHealth Vancouver hospital

American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is campaigning to represent 310 licensed technical workers at PeaceHealth Southwest Medical Center in Vancouver. Nurses there are represented by Washington State Nurses Association (WSNA), an AFT affiliate, but previous attempts to unionize among the hospital's support workers have failed.

The hospital was known as Southwest Washington Medical Center until it merged with the PeaceHealth network in 2010. In a multi-union election held Aug. 7, 1998, nurses voted to join WSNA, and stationary engineers voted to join Operating Engineers Local 701, but Service Employees (SEIU) Local 49 lost among the technical workers and among non-professional support workers. Office and Professional Employees Local 11 later campaigned in 2008 to represent 26 surgical technicians, but dropped the effort when the National La-

bor Relations Board decided that was not an appropriate bargaining unit.

But AFT organizer Joe Crane says worsening conditions led to renewed interest in unionizing. Workers recently lost a paid leave provision, and some are unhappy with a costly high-deductible health insurance plan.

The union campaign has been under way since last summer among technical workers, including MRI, surgical, radiology, CT, ultrasound, anesthesia and pharmacy techs, physical and occupational therapists, and LPNs. If workers unionize, they would become members of PeaceHealth Southwest Caregivers United, a unit of Oregon Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals.

The vote will take place June 1 and 2. After AFT filed for an election, Local 49 also expressed interest, so workers will choose between AFT, SEIU or no union.