

Telecom News: CWAers Fight Verizon's 'Fire Sales' in Rural States

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CWA once again is battling plans by Verizon to abandon phone service in rural areas — this time in northern New England and the upper Midwest — to concentrate its investments in lower-cost, higher-profit cities and suburbs.

Earlier, in 1994, after union activists mounted a political and public awareness campaign in New York state, Verizon dropped its plan to sell off access lines in the more rural Upstate area. CWA's message to regulators and the public: When major telecom companies abandon rural America, these communities lose quality, family-supporting jobs and any hope for information-age economic growth.

Now CWA and IBEW are fighting proposals by Verizon to sell 1.6 million access lines in Maine, Vermont and New Hampshire and another 3.4 million in Ohio, Indiana, Michigan and Illinois.

"Verizon is a profitable, multi-billion-dollar company," said Tammy Drollinger, president of CWA Local 4371 in Marion, Ohio. "It should not be allowed to have a 'fire sale' of its access lines. Verizon has no loyalty to the thousands of customers these lines serve or to the employees who built the company."

CWA and IBEW members in the midwest in August responded to an e-activist campaign, writing their state legislators to "speak out for quality service and good jobs in the communities that you represent." The unions represent 3,000 workers in these states.

"Rep. Peter Visclosky has written to Verizon," said Ed Lowdenslager, president of Local 4773 in La Porte, Ind., asking that the company uphold its responsibility to the people of his state.

Across District 4, stewards have leafleted their workplaces, informing members of what happened in 2001, when Verizon sold 1.3 million access lines in Kentucky, Alabama and Missouri to Alltel, and in 2002, when it sold certain Wisconsin exchanges to Century Tel/USA Telephone.

Though members' wages and benefits initially were protected under existing contracts, subsequent bargaining resulted in an 18-week strike against Alltel in Kentucky over work rules, pensions, health care and other issues and two concessionary contracts at Century Tel.

"The members understand the consequences of letting Verizon go forward with this and are prepared to fight to protect their jobs," Drollinger said.

Lowdenslager also noted that service nose-dived in 2005 when Verizon sold lines in Hawaii to an investment firm, the Carlyle Group. He said such firms invest nothing in the network but resell the lines to smaller telephone companies that cannot afford to invest in maintaining them.

Rural Northeast

In upper New England, with quality telephone service and 3,000 union jobs on the line, CWA and IBEW members began mobilizing in May to hold Verizon to its responsibility to provide universal service. The company employs 2,700 IBEW members and 350 CWA members as service representatives throughout the three states.



"Verizon would abandon its telephone customers in these rural states to smaller companies that do not have the assets to maintain the network or provide the same level of service — just dump them and stick with the more densely populated and more profitable states. Some of these customers would never get the same level of service again," said Cheryl Ahern, president of CWA Local 1400. The local covers Vermont, Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts, representing 1,500 Verizon employees.

CWA and IBEW members marched in July 4th parades in all three states, ran phone banks to alert members of other unions to the problem and reached out to community leaders, members of Congress and governors.

Asking the question, "Will Vermont's Information Super Highway be Turned into a Dirt Road?" Rep. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), now a U.S. senator-elect,



joined with other public officials, Jobs with Justice, the state and local AFL-CIO, Local 1400 and IBEW Local 2326 in conducting a public forum Oct. 10 in Burlington. Sanders chairs the Vermont Workers' Rights Board.

The panel heard testimony from CWA and IBEW members and consumers. Pointing out that the state's Public Service Board has the power to approve the sale, reject it or require modifications in the public interest, CWA Research Economist Ken Peres urged Vermonters to adopt a policy framework to ensure that all residents have the opportunity to obtain affordable high speed Internet service.

"Verizon wants to cherry-pick its customers," said Mike O'Day, a district vice president of CWA Local 1400, told the forum. "They want to liquidate the landlines in rural states to finance high speed data and video networks in more populous states such as Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey and California."

He noted that the companies that have so far shown interest in the lines — Fairpoint, Century Tel and Citizens — all have an aversion to organized labor. "The sale would witness the further decline of good health care benefits for employees, the loss of a defined pension plan, and would be another example of corporate greed for short term gain."

District 1 Vice President Chris Shelton has pointed out to public officials that "The exit of Verizon, a Fortune 500 company, would signal the loss of a spectacular opportunity for the Vermont economy to benefit from a state-of-the-art fiber optic network."

So far, in addition to Sanders, Gov. James Douglas of Vermont, Gov. John Baldacci and Reps. Michael Michaud and Tom Allen of Maine, and Gov. John Lynch of New Hampshire have publicly urged Verizon to drop plans to sell off its phone lines in the three states.