

Labor Pool: Pole Jumping

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Amid corporate war, union tries to link Verizon, Comcast



At the level of business plans and market share, telephone giant Verizon and cable giant Comcast are slugging it out over how people make phone calls, watch TV and use the Internet. Meanwhile, at the level of telephone poles and cable connections, the union that represents many Verizon workers is trying to convince employees at both companies that, ultimately, they have the same interests.

For the past couple of weeks, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers has been running a nationwide campaign to unionize Comcast. In Central Massachusetts, Northborough-based IBEW Local 2325 has been reaching out to about 170 technicians who install, repair and maintain cable lines in North Worcester County and parts of MetroWest.

With technologies converging, David Keating, the local union's business manager, said the Comcast workers do much the same jobs as their counterparts at Verizon. But their pay is about a third less and they don't have access to the kind of pension offered at Verizon, he said. And, while Verizon's union employees automatically move up a pay scale as they gain seniority, Keating said Comcast workers' pay can be arbitrary, based partly on getting managers' permission to take advancement tests.

Prior Failed Attempts

Of course Comcast itself has a very different view of what it offers its employees. In an e-mail message, Shawn Feddeman, vice president of public relations for Comcast's North Central Division, noted that the company was named one of The Boston Business Journal's "best places to work" for four years running. Feddeman also said that unions have tried to organize Comcast employees several times before, and that "the overwhelming majority of Comcast employees choose not to be represented by a labor union."

It's certainly true that previous organizing campaigns, including some by the IBEW, have gone nowhere. But the union says that was because the company used heavy-handed tactics, including threatening to close down locations if the workers sign union cards.

This time, Keating says, it's going about things in a different way. Rather than targeting one or two worksites, the union is talking to workers all over the country at the same time. Natick technicians are getting on conference calls with people who do the same jobs in Seattle and talking about how they can work together.

Keating said the idea of offering safety in numbers worked well in the union's efforts to reach out to technicians at Verizon Business, the company division that used to be MCI. Of course,

Verizon Business technicians don't actually have a union yet either, but union leaders say 70 percent of them have signed cards seeking one, and many of them have taken the important step of publicly speaking out in favor of a union.

Close But No Cigar

IBEW says Comcast workers aren't there yet. Organizer James Perla has been spending much of his time since the March 12 organizing kick-off handing out flyers outside Comcast offices, and he says most workers won't even take one if they think a manager is watching them. He said Comcast is telling its employees that joining the union would mean setting themselves up for a war against the company. But Perla said that's not true at all.

"If that was the case, Verizon would be gone a long time ago," he said.

Perla said workers need their companies to do well if they want to prosper personally, which explains why the IBEW is all for Verizon's expansion of fiber optic service.

In fact, Perla said, Verizon employees' loyalty to their companies sometimes emerges as questions about the Comcast campaign. He said union members who work for Verizon sometimes ask him why the organization should be putting energy into supporting Comcast employees. His answer, he said, is based on simple fairness – "why should they get anything less than what we're making?" But Perla and Keating also say bringing Comcast employees into the union is about boosting the organization so it can work more effectively for all its members.

"Strength in a union is obviously a good thing for any kind of negotiations," he said.