



In the latest escalation of an increasingly bitter labor battle, Verizon Communications Inc. has been telling union members it will suspend basic health-insurance and medical benefits on Aug. 31 for all workers still on strike at that time.

Verizon issued the threat in letters sent to 45,000 workers, who walked off the job to protest proposed cuts to their benefits that the telecommunications company says are necessary to stem a sales decline in its traditional wireline business.

A loss of benefits could test the resolve of union workers who have so far been unified despite going without pay since the strike began Aug. 7, after the expiration of the most-recent three-year contract. Verizon employees represented by the Communications Workers of America and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers have already seen their pension accounts and some disability coverage suspended during the strike, said Bob Master, a CWA legislative and political director.

"We feel the company is exercising any means possible to make our members suffer in hopes of breaking our unity," said Chuck Simpson, president of CWA Local 2204 in Salem, Va.

The CWA, which represents about 35,000 Verizon workers, has a \$400 million fund to distribute to members. Those workers are eligible for \$200 a week after 15 days of the strike and \$300 a week beyond 30 days.

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