

Form rank-and-file committees to expand the struggle

West Virginia telecommunications workers begin strike as teachers' walkout enters second week

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Frontier Communications workers in West Virginia and part of Virginia went on strike early Sunday morning as the walkout by 33,000 West Virginia teachers and public school employees entered a new and decisive stage.

The announcement of the strike by 1,400 Frontier workers came shortly after the Republican-controlled state Senate carried out a calculated provocation against the striking teachers, voting Saturday night to reduce the pay offer to teachers and school employees from 5 percent to 4 percent.

The Frontier workers, who are members of the Communications Workers of America (CWA), have been working without a contract since August 5 of last year. They face mounting job cuts and other attacks on their working conditions. Since Frontier acquired Verizon's land lines in West Virginia in 2010, the company has cut over 500 jobs in the state.

The school strike, the first statewide teachers' strike in West Virginia since 1990, has continued and gained strength as a result of a rebellion by rank-and-file teachers against the unions. Union leaders called for a return to work last Tuesday on the basis of a sellout agreement with Governor Jim Justice, a billionaire coal operator, which failed to address their demands for decent wages and lower health care costs. Teacher pay in West Virginia ranks 48th among the nation's 50 states.

Teachers met across the state and decided to reject the unions' deal and defy their instructions to return to work on Thursday. Since then, as teachers, students and other workers continued to rally at the state Capitol, the

union leaders and state Democratic politicians have been plotting to end the strike on the basis of a rotten "compromise" that does nothing to address rising health costs and near-poverty wages for educators, school employees and other state workers.

With the teachers facing threats of injunctions, fines and possible arrests, and resistance spreading to other sections of the working class, the conditions are growing for a broader struggle, including a general strike, to defeat any attempt to break the teachers' strike. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party are urging educators to form rank-and-file strike committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the union officials and expand the movement throughout the region and nationally.

The West Virginia Education Association (WVEA), the American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV) and the West Virginia School Service and Personnel Association (WVSSPA) have spent the past week trying to lower expectations and convince strikers to return to work based on Governor Justice's hollow promise of a 5 percent pay raise and a task force to examine health care funding.

In response to Saturday's events, WVEA President Dale Lee announced that the strike will continue "indefinitely" until the bill "passes at 5 percent."

Neither the bill passed Saturday nor the unions' counterproposal meets the basic demands motivating the teachers' strike. A principal demand of teachers is an end to soaring health care costs due to under-funding of the Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA).

This demand is not even being discussed in the state legislature.

In the days following the teachers' rebellion, the unions, with the backing of local and national media, have sought to reestablish their control of the strike and direct it behind the Democratic Party. They are bringing forward figures such as state Senator Richard Ojeda, a right-wing Democrat and supporter of Trump in the last election, who is being promoted as a "friend" of the teachers.

Teachers should not be deceived by these maneuvers. The unions are seeking some way to keep the strike isolated and impose an agreement that has already been rejected by the rank and file. At the same time, they hope to use threats of injunctions and fines to pressure teachers back to work.

Republican Senate President Mitch Carmichael has evidently decided that more forceful action is needed to defeat the resistance of the teachers. He first blocked a vote in the Senate on Justice's 5 percent proposal, saying "we're not going to be boxed in the corner by protesters," before reducing the pay proposal even further.

Carmichael, whose top campaign contributors include DuPont, Dow, Arch Coal, Patriot Coal, American Electric Power and other energy, chemical and pharmaceutical giants, speaks for a significant section of big business and the political establishment that is opposed to anything that might appear to be a concession to striking teachers.

While declaring the strike "illegal," Governor Justice has said he wants to avoid strike-breaking court injunctions. However, he warned that failure to reach a deal on Saturday would throw the government into "no man's land." This followed comments February 23 when he said, "I really don't want to go to DEFCON 15," referring to military preparedness for all-out war.

It is critical that teachers not allow the big business politicians, assisted by the unions, to retake the initiative. The strike by Frontier telecommunications workers points to the widespread support in the entire working class for a unified fight against the attack on jobs, wages and living standards.

On Friday, thousands of high school and other students participated in a demonstration to support their teachers, and there are growing calls among state workers for united action. Teachers and public-school

workers in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Arizona, California and other states are pressing for strike action.

These are the real allies of the teachers and telecom workers—not the strike-breaking union bureaucrats and bribed political representatives of the corporations and banks! Teachers, school employees and telecom workers should form rank-and-file strike committees, independent of the unions and democratically controlled by the workers, to fight for the mobilization of the full strength of the working class behind their struggles.

These committees should issue appeals to other state workers, educators, health care workers, miners, chemical workers, unemployed workers and youth to join the struggle and fight for the right of all workers for secure and good paying jobs, quality health care and other social rights.

Mass meetings and demonstrations should be called, and discussions held on preparing a general strike to defend teachers against injunctions and threats of firings, fines and jail time. This will lay the basis for an industrial and political counteroffensive nationally against austerity and social inequality.

The WSWS Teacher Newsletter and the Socialist Equality Party will do everything in our power to assist teachers and other workers in carrying out this strategy.



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