

West Virginia telecommunications workers continue strike, support teachers

Our reporters
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More than 1,400 West Virginia Frontier Communications workers facing job cuts and corporate restructuring went on strike Sunday morning. The walkout began as more than 33,000 teachers and public employees continued their strike across all 55 counties in the state.

The Communications Workers of America (CWA), the bargaining agent for the Frontier workers, announced on Saturday that the strike would proceed. The union said it had been unable to reach an agreement with the company in contract talks.

Workers have been without a contract for more than seven months. In addition to workers in West Virginia, the strike has halted operations in Ashburn in neighboring Virginia.

In a statement released on Sunday, Frontier made clear it was determined to continue its cost-cutting program to meet the profit demands of shareholders and lenders. Since Verizon sold its West Virginia operations to Frontier in 2010, the company has wiped out more than 500 jobs across the state, including more than 50 since December 2017, as part of a national restructuring.

Chris Levendos, executive vice president of field operations, said Frontier's objective was to preserve "good jobs with competitive wages" while "addressing the needs of our ever-changing business."

The statement declared that Frontier had already "activated its strike contingency plan" with strikebreakers from "members of the management team, outside contractors and representatives from other Frontier organizations." The company would "continue to engage in constructive negotiations with CWA and resolve this matter quickly."

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with picketing workers outside the company's retail store in

Charleston. The building is located within clear view of the state Capitol, where thousands of public school employees and students have been gathering to demand a decent wage and affordable health care.

The workers expressed support for the striking teachers. Vince and Kurt, who have worked for 17 and 18 years, respectively, for Verizon and then Frontier, explained the issues in their fight.

Vince said, "The teachers in West Virginia don't make enough money. My dad was a schoolteacher in Fayette County for 40 years, and I know how much a teacher makes. I'm glad they are out with us."

He continued, "Frontier has gotten rid of 200 jobs and now the company is going after our health care just like the state government is doing to the teachers. They want to force us to pay more for insurance. It started with the coal companies declaring bankruptcy to get out of pensions and health care, and it's spread all throughout West Virginia.

"A lineman job in West Virginia is not easy. You have to deal with the weather and terrain, and climb mountains and walk half a mile down a railroad track to fix a phone. And the infrastructure has not been kept up.

"We don't really know what is being discussed in negotiations, but the union says we're fighting for jobs, health care and against contracting out."

Another Frontier worker pointed out that Republican state Senate President Mitch Carmichael had been employed by Frontier as a middle manager and the company's chief lobbyist in the state legislature.

Tina, another veteran telecom worker on the picket line, said, "I'm proud of the teachers. It was a long time coming. My sister is a teacher in Boone County and she had to take half of her tax return to pay doctor bills.

“My son works in the mines, and they have to put up with a lot of stuff they never used to. He works six days a week without any Saturdays off. I asked him why he didn’t he go to the UMW (United Mine Workers) to get a Saturday off. He told me the union didn’t care. All they wanted to do was put money in their pockets.

“He is 37 and going in for a Black Lung test. He probably has it. He makes \$28 an hour, which is more than the \$14 you get in a nonunion mine, but he has no life. He works night shifts and by the time he wakes up on Sunday, it’s time to go to work again. He’s at his wit’s end. With a daughter to support, payments on a vehicle to get to work, it’s hard to save any money.”

Frontier, which has a market value of nearly \$700 million, operates in 28 states across the US. In 2010, Verizon, the second largest US telecommunications giant after AT&T, sold off what it considered its landline systems in 14 rural states to Frontier. In 2015, Verizon sold its operations in California, Texas and three other states to Frontier for more than \$10.5 billion.

These acquisitions have been accompanied by a wave of restructuring. In November 2016, Frontier announced that it was laying off more than 1,000 workers over the next year.

This assault is being driven by the profit interests of the global financial institutions that dominate over corporations and governments around the world. Frontier is renowned for its particularly generous dividend payments to shareholders. In 2008, for example, its dividend-to-net-income ratio was 175 percent, meaning it paid out to shareholders nearly double the total income earned by the company that year. These payouts have been financed by taking on more and more debt, which now totals close to \$18 billion.

The company’s main lenders include JP Morgan, Citibank, Bank of America, Barclays, Credit Suisse, Deutsche Bank, Morgan Stanley and Goldman Sachs. In the first nine months of 2017, Frontier paid off more than \$1.5 billion in debt to these institutions. The company is expected to pay over \$828 million servicing its debt in 2019, \$1.1 billion in 2020, and more than \$2 billion in 2021 and 2022.

This money has been generated from the increased exploitation of Frontier workers and the neglect of line infrastructure.

The fight by Frontier workers against this assault can be developed only by expanding the struggle, including by uniting with teachers in West Virginia and with other telecommunications workers across the country.

The CWA is deeply opposed to any such fight. The union has raised no opposition to the wave of corporate restructuring by Frontier across the country. Instead, it has promoted the most extreme parochialism to divide workers, presenting the company’s attacks as a purely West Virginia issue.

The CWA’s sole concern is that Frontier’s job shedding and use of contract labor is undermining the dues payments that pad the salaries of the union bureaucrats. The CWA’s attitude to the workers was made clear in its isolation and sellout of a seven-week strike by Verizon workers in 2016.



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