

As nine-day teachers' strike concludes

Striking West Virginia Frontier telecom workers speak out

Our reporters
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Thursday marks the fifth day of a strike by over 1,400 Frontier telecommunication workers in Virginia and West Virginia. Frontier has eliminated over 500 jobs in West Virginia since 2010 and is threatening to eliminate 15 percent of its current workforce. Lorraine, a Frontier worker in Ashburn, Virginia told the WSWS that Frontier is paying scabs 98 dollars an hour and up, with bonuses in order to continue operations.

When the strike began, 33,000 teachers and public school workers in West Virginia were also on strike. On Monday, thousands of teachers flooded the capitol building in Charleston, which is within eyesight of the picket line at Frontier headquarters, just across the Kanawha river. The Communication Workers of America union (CWA) made no attempt to unite the struggle of Frontier workers with the teachers.

Yesterday, after nine days on strike, the teachers were sent back to work when their unions concluded a sell-out agreement with Republican governor Jim Justice and the Republican-controlled state legislature that provides state employees with a meager five percent pay raise and no resolution of their main demand: guaranteed funding for their underfunded health insurance fund, the Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA). A "task force", to be composed of Democratic and Republican legislators, as well as union leaders, has promised to look into the issue, although many teachers expressed skepticism about the deal.

Furthermore, Governor Justice and state legislators have indicated that the teacher's raise will be funded not by taxing the billion-dollar energy companies which rule the state, but through cuts to social spending, including to Medicaid, the health care program for the

poor that one-third of West Virginians rely upon.

Yesterday, WSWS reporters spoke to picketing Frontier workers in Charleston about their strike and the recently concluded teachers strike.

Chris, a worker with nine years, said, "Every worker, whether it be the teachers that were fighting in the capitol, or our communication workers, we all have the right to affordable, high-quality health care. I have two kids in public school, and my sister's a teacher in Lincoln County. Her PEIA premiums were going to raise from 80 to 600 dollars, which is astronomical. And a five percent raise doesn't really offset that."

He was upset about the threats made to Medicaid in order to pay public employee's raises. "There's got to be a better alternative, like implementing a tax on the billion dollar corporations. That's not going to hurt them at all, but if you take the funding from Medicaid, people are going to suffer."

Chris noted that the picketing Frontier workers had received encouragement from striking school employees, "We had teachers come here and drop off food to us and offer their support."

WSWS reporters asked Chris what he thought about the support for the teachers strike from teachers across the country and around the world. "I think it's fantastic," he said. "If all the teachers band together, and the same for us, if all the communication workers band together, there's no fight we can't win. All we want here is to take care of our families, and provide them with great, affordable health care."

Jenny has a Master's degree in education but works at Frontier because she can't earn a good wage as a teacher. "There are a lot of educators at Frontier," she said, "who couldn't make enough money to provide for

their families as teachers. The guy who works across from me has a degree in education. My supervisor has both a nursing degree and a teaching degree, and she works here.”

Nicki, a customer service rep with two years, reported that younger Frontier workers face precarious working conditions, “The company says they’ll keep 85 percent of the jobs, but the other 15 percent, the newer hires like myself, we do not have job security. And the newer reps were hired in at a lower pay rate. We also make a five percent commission, but they recently doubled our quotas and began routing our calls to third party vendors so that it’s impossible for us to meet the quotas and get our commission pay. I think the higher paid and lower paid reps need to stick together. They have their job security, and they don’t have to be out here fighting for us, but they are. That means a lot.”

Justin, a sales rep with 2 years, said, “We’re fighting for job security and to keep the health benefits that we have. I think that [in the teachers strike] social media played a big role in getting the word out to the world. It’s different than it was in the 1990s. We all want for our families to have good lives. I think all workers, anybody that’s in the working class, no matter your color or your origin should be fighting together.”



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