

CWA isolates Frontier Communications strikers

Samuel Davidson
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The Communications Workers of America (CWA) is working to isolate the 1,400 striking telecommunication workers at Frontier in West Virginia and parts of Virginia. The strike, which began on Sunday, March 4, is nearing the end of its second week.

Workers are fighting for their jobs and against further attacks on health care and pension benefits. Frontier, which has already cut 500 jobs in the past few years, is planning to eliminate another 500 jobs. Many workers with 14, 15 and 16 years of experience with the company would be cut.

The company is making it clear it wants to break the strike, refusing to bargain and is bringing in contractors, management and personnel from other parts of its region to keep operations going. The company has also shifted work to Frontier call centers in Florida, according to a worker, a member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), who posted a comment on a CWA social media page.

In the face of this strikebreaking assault, the CWA and other unions are doing everything to prevent the mobilization of other workers both Frontier locations in other states, let alone other telecom workers at Verizon and AT&T who are also battling to save their jobs.

The strike takes place as Verizon, which is raking in \$3 billion to \$4 billion in tax cuts this year due to President Trump, is closing six call centers across the country—one-third of its total—and wiping out 3,000 customer service jobs.

Frontier is the fourth largest provider of telecommunication services in the US. It provides landline, TV and Internet services in mostly rural areas of 29 states throughout the country but also includes several large metropolitan areas.

While the company dates back to the 1930s it became

a major provider of telecom services only in the last two decades after the deregulation of the industry by then president Bill Clinton. The telecom bill passed by both Democrats and Republicans allowed the former Bell System companies to get out of providing service in less populated areas of the country and concentrate on the highly profitable, more densely populated areas.

Much of Frontier's territory consists of former GTE operations, which it purchased from Verizon in 2010. Verizon itself was the result of a merger of Bell Atlantic and GTE in 2000. Frontier also acquired many areas from AT&T, primarily the former Southern New England Telephone company in Connecticut.

The area in West Virginia and Virginia where the current strike is taking place was also acquired from Verizon as part of the 2010 deal but was not former GTE territory. It had been the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company of West Virginia, once a part of the Bell system and one of the companies that made up Bell Atlantic.

This reorganization benefited the wealthy stockholders of all of three companies at the expense of both the workers and the customers. Verizon and AT&T have pushed up revenues by building out their broadband networks while no longer having to shoulder the added costs of providing service in rural areas. Frontier was now freed to raise prices and cut maintenance to its customers citing the added cost of reaching rural populations as justification.

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. While squeezing workers, the company has paid billions to its main lenders include JP Morgan, Citibank, Bank of America, Barclays, Credit Suisse, Deutsche Bank, Morgan Stanley and Goldman Sachs.

Since the 2008 recession, both Verizon and AT&T stock have remained basically the same, while Frontier stock has fallen from a high of over \$235 per share in March 2007 to less than \$8.00 per share today. The company has responded to its stagnating or tanking stock through a savage cost-cutting campaign, affecting both workers and customers.

CWA President Chris Shelton postures as an opponent of Wall Street and was a backer of Bernie Sanders and his campaign for the presidential nomination by the Democratic Party, before the CWA backed Hillary Clinton, a shill for Wall Street. Shelton and the CWA combine phony denunciations of social inequality with a deliberate policy of suppressing opposition by telecom workers, and betraying strikes when they occur.

This included the sellout of the 45-day strike by 40,000 Verizon workers on the US east coast, and brief strikes by AT&T workers on the west coast. The deals the CWA signed, which they claimed would “save jobs,” have been followed by job cuts by both Verizon and AT&T.

In the past two decades Verizon has cut nearly 100,000 jobs and AT&T has cut an even larger number of workers. Healthcare and retirement benefits have been cut or eliminated. Frontier has been cutting workers, reducing service and increasing rates.

The Frontier strike erupted as 30,000 West Virginia teachers and other school employees were waging a nine-day strike, in defiance of the state’s anti-strike laws and the sabotage of the teacher unions. With the corporations making billions in profits and raking in billions more in tax cuts, telecom workers are determined to recoup the years of concessions handed over by the CWA.

On April 14, the contract expires for 10,000 AT&T Midwest workers in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Wisconsin and Illinois. The only way Frontier workers can win their struggle is to elect rank-and-file strike committees, controlled by workers themselves and free from the control of the CWA, to break the isolation of their strike and mobilize the broadest support among telecom workers and every section of the working class

for their battle.



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