

“We want to know the details of the agreement”

CWA tries to ram through sellout deal to end Frontier strike

Our reporters
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The Communications Workers of America (CWA) announced late Sunday night that it has reached an agreement with Frontier Communications and is shutting down the three-week strike by 1,400 workers in West Virginia and parts of Virginia. The union has ordered strikers back to work as early as 6 pm today without permitting workers to first vote on the deal, which will dictate the terms of their employment for the next three years.

The CWA announced it was holding meetings today to “brief” workers on the agreement and will hold a vote on the proposal in “the coming weeks.” What few details that have been revealed indicate that it is another sellout. The wage increases—three 2 percent annual raises—are below the 2.2 percent rate of inflation and will continue the erosion of living standards. The hated multi-tier wage and pension system will continue. In addition, the deal includes “modest healthcare contribution increases as well as plan design changes that do not begin until 2019.”

Predictably, the CWA declared the strike a “victory,” claiming “the main objective of Job Security for every member in the bargaining unit has been achieved.” But as thousands of workers at Verizon, AT&T and other telecom giants who have lost their jobs know, such promises from the CWA are worthless. This fact is underscored by Verizon’s announcement earlier this month that it was closing one-third of its call centers this year, eliminating 3,000 customer service jobs.

It is clear that the CWA fears if workers had a chance to read, study and discuss the full contract, they would reject it out of hand and continue the strike. Instead the CWA is seeking to use the economic hardship workers faced—workers have received no unemployment benefits and the meager \$200 strike benefits did not kick in until 21 days—to starve workers into submission, while

dangling a \$1,250 “signing bonus” before them.

Rank-and-file Frontier workers should follow the example of the West Virginia teachers who organized impromptu meetings and rejected the first efforts by the teachers’ unions to shut down the strike on March 1. Frontier workers should reject this blackmail. Instead of going back to work, they should demand the full contract, with ample time to study and discuss its contents plus a tripling of strike benefits from the CWA strike fund.

Rank-and-file committees should be elected to take the conduct of this struggle out of the hands of the CWA and to fight to mobilize the broadest support for a genuine fight in defense of jobs and living standards.

“West Virginia folks don’t lay down that easy,” said a young striker in Charleston, West Virginia. “We want to know the details of the agreement, and to know if we are going to have a job in three to five years. How else can you make longer term decisions like whether to buy a home or not?

“A lot of workers are hurting. They passed a law in West Virginia last year to deny unemployment benefits to striking workers. All we’ve gotten from the union is \$25 per picket duty and \$200 after 21 days. The whole reason we struck was to protect our jobs—we have to know the terms of the deal.”

Frontier, the fourth largest provider of telecommunication services in the US, has cut 500 jobs since it took over Verizon’s landline assets in West Virginia and Ashton, Virginia as part of \$8.6 billion deal in 2009. The company was loaded up with debt as a result of the deal and has slashed jobs and squeezed the workforce to pay its wealthy shareholders.

The timing of this sellout is significant. No doubt, the CWA executives like CWA President Chris Shelton and Ed Mooney, Vice President of CWA District 2-13, want

to hold on to as much of their multi-million-dollar strike fund as possible so they can continue to fund their expense accounts.

Of even greater concern is the growing wave of working class struggles that started with teachers in West Virginia and is spreading throughout the country and internationally. In mid-April, 10,000 AT&T Midwest workers in Illinois, Michigan, Indiana and other states face a contract expiration, and they are determined to overturn years of CWA-backed concessions now that the telecom giants are making record profits.

The CWA has systematically blocked any unified struggle of communication workers, forcing different sections of workers to labor months, even years, without new contracts, and isolating and defeating strikes at Verizon, AT&T West and elsewhere when struggles do erupt.

“Maybe that’s why they’re shutting the strike down now,” said the young Frontier striker, referring to the West Virginia teachers strike, which was also betrayed by the unions, without resolving any of the issues the teachers were fighting for, above all ending soaring health care costs imposed by the state’s public employee insurance agency. “Now they’re paying for the raise by cutting money from after school programs and other things,” the Frontier striker said.

The day before the CWA announced the sellout, it held a rally in front of the Frontier headquarters in Charleston, which included the leaders of the three teachers and school service personnel unions, which betrayed the nine-day teachers strike, along with United Mine Workers President Cecil Roberts, CWA President Chris Shelton, and Democratic state senator Richard Ojeda. Bob Brown, a lobbyist for the AFT, declared, “All of the organizations for workers—we’re here to be with you. Not just in thoughts and prayers—but in deeds.”

Far from breaking the isolation of the Frontier strikers—who have courageously defied violent threats from strikebreakers and injunctions issued by judges—the union bureaucrats were well aware of the sellout in the making and were there to cover it up with rhetoric about solidarity. The same forces, including Democrats like Ojeda, came together to push through the sellout of the teachers strike and block the struggle from spreading throughout country and challenging the giant corporations and Wall Street banks, which are reaping billions from the steady impoverishment of the working class.

“Before the rally Saturday, I started having even more intense feelings that this was already worked out by the

union and the company,” another young worker from Charleston told the WSWS *Telecom Worker Newsletter*. “Some of my union brothers and sisters have shared the same feelings among each other, we don’t trust the union leaders or the fact that there wasn’t some kind of deal between them and the company to declare a strike, maybe to save wages for these 22 days, not have to pay out profit sharing this year, etc.

“Whether or not we got played by the union leaders and the company, I am proud of all of us that we stuck together. I’m amazed how hard we fought for everyone. It surprised the company so much they tried to hold us back by seeking injunctions, but still, we went out, followed the scabs with our mobile picketing. We used social media to get information out to the public instead of letting the company spin the story the way they wanted.”

A sales consultant with three years noted that Frontier already has a two-tier wage system for call center workers. “For the C’s [workers with C-tier wages], you get around \$20 plus a raise every six months about equal to the cost of living. The B’s make about \$35 an hour, sometimes \$40 depending on how long you’ve been there, even though the B’s and C’s do the same work.

“Six or so years ago when we were Verizon we had a higher pay structure. I can make up to \$5,000 a month in commission—they’ve basically doubled the sales quota to get the bonus. It’s very difficult to meet it because a lot of calls are not sales calls but people having trouble with their bills. How can I sell something to someone who can’t pay a bill? If the market crashes and the billionaires lost half of their income, they would still be fine. Meanwhile, most workers are living paycheck-to-paycheck.”

A former customer service worker with 13 years added, “Everybody should get paid the same amount of money if you are doing the same job. The union gave them way too much on healthcare and job security in the last contract. The company kept saying they don’t have money but the difference in pay between average worker and these guys at the top is ridiculous.”



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