

Frontier workers in Tampa, Florida face cuts to health care and retirement

Matthew MacEgan
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Over a thousand Frontier Communications workers in Tampa, Florida, will decide Thursday morning whether to authorize strike action as the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local Union 824 negotiates a new contract in advance of the expiration of the current contract this Friday.

Frontier is a Connecticut-based telecommunications company that purchased Verizon's wireline assets in California, Texas and Florida in 2015 for \$10.5 billion. The communications company maintains fiber optic and copper networks and provides high-speed internet and telephone services to 25 states. As of December 2019, it was serving approximately 4.1 million customers and employing 18,300 people.

On April 14, 2020, Frontier filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, \$10 billion in debt largely due to the acquisition of Verizon wireline services in 2015. Despite this, a US bankruptcy judge in late May approved \$37.7 million in bonuses for Frontier executives, a reward for services rendered to Wall Street.

Just prior to this award, in March 2020, Frontier announced plans to postpone pension contributions totaling \$153 million using provisions of the CARES Act signed by former President Donald Trump. At that time, the WSWWS noted that the pension was already underfunded by nearly a billion dollars. This was compounding retirement problems for Frontier workers, who also received a hit on their 401k plans which came in the form of Frontier shares.

The company has since been working with state governments to sign off on its bankruptcy reorganization plan that will eliminate the \$10 billion debt, as well as \$1 billion in interest payments. The most recent approval came in February with Connecticut, which is requiring Frontier to expand its fiber optic network and maintain its current number of technicians and customer service representatives in the state.

The main contention with Tampa workers is over health care. During recent contract negotiations with IBEW 824, the company proposed either doubling the percentage that

active employees pay for health care or removing health care coverage from employees during retirement. Under previous contracts, the longer employees worked, the more of their health care would be covered during retirement. Now Frontier is aiming to remove the retiree health benefit completely.

Tampa workers are angry and want to fight. One worker wrote on Facebook: "We stood by and supported Frontier through their bankruptcy not knowing how it was going to turn out, stood by trying our best not to run away, doing our best with what they would allow us to do, and they just don't care. We are ants to them." Another worker wrote: "I've been with the company for 28 years. We just want what we've worked for all these years."

But rather than appealing to its approximately 775,000 members and retirees to fight for the health care of its Tampa workers, the IBEW has decided to appeal to major corporations in the Tampa Bay area. They staged an "informational" picket on Super Bowl Sunday on February 7, in the words of Local President Keith LaPlant "to send a clear message to Frontier and their corporate partners like the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Raymond James Stadium."

On Facebook, LaPlant instructed participants to only use signs made at the union hall that featured approved messages. He told members not to "mention an issue not related to our cause." The banners featured messages such as "Shame on Frontier," "Honk for Essential Workers," and "Enough is Enough." The local also hired an airplane to fly over the stadium during the Super Bowl with a banner declaring: "Frontier Communications fails essential workers."

This is an unserious approach to fighting for the health and lives of Frontier workers aimed at muzzling and controlling workers. On February 7, IBEW 824 staged a picket photograph in front of a giant banner reading "#GoBucs" (after the city's football team, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, who were playing in the game) and similarly organized another informational picket on April 10 at Raymond James Stadium when it was hosting WrestleMania 37, a major

WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) event. In the leadup to the Super Bowl Sunday protest, LaPlant explained that one of their goals with this stunt was “to have everyone back at the Union hall no later than 4pm so everyone can get home in time for the game.”

The approach of IBEW 824, however, cannot simply be seen as an inept initiative developed by apparent sports fanatics. The IBEW and the other unions in the telecommunications industry have a history of sabotaging the struggles of telecommunication workers.

In the spring of 2016, 39,000 Verizon workers across the Eastern United States—in cities including New York City, Boston, Philadelphia and Washington D.C.—went on strike for seven weeks before their struggle was shut down by both the IBEW and the Communications Workers of America (CWA). Both the IBEW and the CWA met behind closed doors with Verizon executives and Obama administration officials, who had supervised what was then the greatest transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top in US history.

The CWA ushered Verizon workers back to their jobs before they could see the full contract or vote on it. In an effort to appease the angry workers, the union released a 10-page summary of a supposed tentative agreement, but the “voting” that the CWA then initiated was a fraud since it had no impact on the end of the strike.

That same spring, 1,700 AT&T West workers in San Diego went on strike but were intentionally isolated from their brothers and sisters striking against Verizon on the East Coast. CWA Local 9509 called off its four-day walkout to prevent any kind of united struggle across the country. They declared that the “grievance was settled,” but workers were ordered back without any information on the alleged settlement.

Both the Verizon and AT&T strikes in 2016 resulted in deals that union officials claimed would “save jobs” but in reality were followed by job cuts by both companies.

Since then, the CWA and the IBEW have continued to sell out major struggles of telecommunications workers, including:

- In 2017, the IBEW isolated a strike of 1,800 Spectrum workers in New York and New Jersey. At that time the WSWs noted that both the IBEW and CWA represented (and continue to represent) tens of thousands of workers at Verizon, AT&T and other telecom companies who all face the same attacks but made no attempt to mobilize any other workers.

- In 2018, approximately 1,400 Frontier workers in West Virginia went on strike but were similarly isolated by the CWA. The 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, but the CWA ensured that the Frontier workers did not link up with the educators in a common struggle.

- In 2019, the CWA shut down a powerful six-day strike by 22,000 AT&T workers across nine Southern US states. The action was staged by the CWA as an “unfair labor practice” strike, limiting the strike to complaints over “bad faith bargaining.” The WSWs warned then that this limitation would pave the way for a quick return to work without a contract or a single substantive issue moving in the workers’ favor. This is exactly what happened.

In all of these cases, the CWA and IBEW leaderships ensured that telecommunication workers were as isolated as possible. The same is now the case with the IBEW local in Tampa, which is channeling the pent-up anger of its rank and file into ineffectual protests at sporting events. The IBEW will point to these shallow protests and claim that it did something to fight for the benefit of its workers while it negotiates a sellout with the company behind closed doors.

There is immense potential for Frontier workers to break out of the strait jacket imposed by the IBEW and appeal to the broadest layers of workers across the US and worldwide.

Over the past year, tens of thousands of educators have opposed the unsafe return to public schools across Florida. Last January, thousands of educators rallied at the state capitol in Tallahassee to demand increases in pay and school spending.

Florida also currently has 12 Amazon fulfillment centers across the state with two more scheduled to open in 2021. Each of these centers can employ more than 1,500 full-time workers who face similar difficulties to those faced by Frontier workers.

The WSWs is assisting workers everywhere in the building of an interconnected network of rank-and-file committees in key industries. We call on Frontier workers in Tampa to form an independent committee that can appeal to these broad layers of workers (rather than the corporate shells at Raymond James Stadium) and make a real fight for not only health care but also better wages, working conditions and other necessary rights that all workers should enjoy in the US and worldwide.



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