

# West Virginia retiree speaks about life on a fixed income, war and the pandemic

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13 May 2022

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with Charles, a 68-year-old retiree living in West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle about life in West Virginia on a fixed income amidst surging inflation, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and imperialist war.

Like many workers in recent decades, and especially since the rise of the so-called "gig economy," Charles has held a number of jobs throughout his career in order to make ends meet. These include social work in behavioral health with women and children suffering from drug and alcohol addiction, environmental education in association with local state parks, non-profit environmental advocacy, and several stints of self-employment.

He is now living with his wife in retirement. They are surviving on a fixed income, derived largely from Social Security benefits, and face the ravages of rampant inflation and soaring medical costs.

"As a result of my checkered work history, my Social Security benefits are limited in retirement," Charles said. "Living on a fixed income is difficult. With inflation, everything, including the price of gasoline, is going up, but my income is fixed. Even when those of us on Social Security get a modest increase in benefits, they do not keep pace with inflation. So, in effect, the so-called raise turns out to be a pay cut."

"Medicare insurance comes out of my monthly allotment, and that is a considerable amount," he added. "It is getting to the point where hard choices have to be made in regard to what items are necessities and which are luxuries. Like many retired people, I have little disposable income."

The search for work throughout his career led Charles to move around. He lived for a time in southwestern Virginia, in the heart of Central Appalachia. But he notes that although Appalachia has historically rooted poverty, the conditions of life for workers in the region are representative of what is faced by workers throughout the United States and the world.

"In the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia, where I live now, there's a lot of diversity. There are neighborhoods that are pretty affluent and then there are pockets of extreme poverty, sort of a microcosm of the nation and really the world," he explained.

"In areas of Martinsburg, which isn't far from where I live, there's extreme poverty. There's drugs and opioid addiction and alcoholism and homelessness.

"And then there are communities that are doing quite well, people of higher income. A lot of those people come from places like Washington D.C. and Baltimore and the suburbs. And they live here and they raise the cost of living for the people who are native to this region. It just makes it more expensive to be here and in some ways it forces people out of the more affluent counties into the poorer rural sections, because that's the only place where they can afford to live.

"Now, I will say too that where I live in rural West Virginia, the heart of Appalachia, you cannot go to town to buy groceries without encountering destitute people, many of them homeless, some of them with addictions to drugs and alcohol taken to blunt their pain and despair, people asking for handouts. It's a commonplace occurrence in the wealthiest but most

unequal nation on earth. On the other hand, there is Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos.

"We see that Hoovervilles are cropping up all around. Tens of thousands of people are living in destitution and squalor, many of them being hard workers down on their luck, living in makeshift tarp shelters and encampments, without decent food, potable water or sanitation. It is hard for my wife and I in old age to get by on a fixed income, but it is harder still for the disenfranchised. These are our working class brothers and sisters, our comrades. Their lives and their hopes and dreams matter too. This is the dystopian aspect of America that many try to ignore, but it is always there, growing like a tumor."

These disparities also find expression in the public education system, where some of Charles' friends work as teachers.

"The differences are astounding," he said. "The people in the well-to-do communities have the best of everything. They have modern schools. They have working air conditioning and heat. And they have the best textbooks, the best computers and the most up-to-date technology.

"Whereas the other schools in Martinsburg, those people are struggling. And that teacher friend of mine would often purchase, especially during the COVID pandemic, hand sanitizer and masks and books for her class, her children, out of her own salary. And trust me, her salary isn't very good! Teachers never get paid what they are worth, but you know a lot of their care and a lot of them dig into their own pockets and sacrifice for the benefit of their students, hoping to give them a better chance at life."

These desperate conditions fueled the explosive strike of West Virginia teachers in 2018, in which Charles participated, joining the picket lines in solidarity and fighting for the creation of independent rank-and-file committees.

"I went out on the picket lines to two schools," Charles said. "I was there multiple times. I just wanted to be there in solidarity with the striking teachers and they were quite surprised that an outsider would come out and picket with them.

"Some people were hurling abuses at us and others were honking their horns in support. There were a few people threatening violence and things like that and saying the teachers were lazy and they just didn't want to work. That was all just nonsense because I know those people and I did know the character of a lot of those teachers and the sacrifices they made for their students."

"I think there was some appreciation for that," he added, "to endure the discomfort. It was cold. It was drizzling. It was raining. It was pretty miserable at times. But there was some camaraderie in sharing in that and being in solidarity with other people. And that's something I think that workers need to do. We need to show solidarity with workers, all around the country, all around the globe. Because that's where it's at, that's where progress is won."

On the role played by the teachers unions in isolating and imposing a sellout deal, Charles explained, "It was hard on them [teachers] not having income, you know, very limited strike funds and things like that. But I

also knew the history of the unions and that the union was going to sell them out. And I tried to alert the people to that. I felt like there was some animosity toward the union, but I felt like there was no real effort to try and form their own rank-and-file committees to take matters into their own hands. I think in the coalfield regions, I think the people were more willing to do those things. I think they were a little more accustomed to having to struggle for any gains they were going to get.”

Long accustomed to viewing West Virginia as a backwater and its workers as hopelessly backward, the media and political establishment were taken by surprise by the eruption of class struggle in West Virginia and its spread to educators in several other states that year. But as Charles noted, “If you know the history of West Virginia, it shouldn’t come as a surprise.”

Only two years prior, the campaign of Bernie Sanders, who claimed to support socialism and a “political revolution” against the “billionaire class,” received overwhelming support among West Virginia workers and youth.

“There’s no question that Sanders was very popular in West Virginia, as he was in much of the country,” Charles said. “And it was also apparent that the Democratic National Committee was quite alarmed by his popularity with the people, with the working class in particular, because Sanders was called a socialist by the media. And for Sanders to enjoy that kind of popularity in this state was pretty astounding to behold.”

“Unfortunately, I think Sanders served as a sheep dog for the Democratic Party,” he added, “and he did eventually fall in line for Hillary Clinton, who was the anointed one. But lessons can be drawn from that I think. The people of West Virginia are open to progressive candidates.

“Now Bernie Sanders was by socialist standards a very moderate progressive, and he’s portrayed as a flaming radical in the corporate media, of course. But that does indicate that there is a willingness to depart from the outside perceptions of what West Virginians are, or who they are, and what they stand for. Anyone who really, truly champions the cause of the working class should do well here, but there’s a lot of propaganda to be overcome to get down to the core of that.”

According to the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, more than 500,000 SARS-CoV-2 infections have occurred in the state, with more than 6,870 West Virginians having died from the virus. At a death rate of about 383 per 100,000 residents, West Virginia ranks as the eighth worst impacted state in the US, according to the *New York Times* tracker.

“I had COVID this year, I think in about the first or second week of January, and it was probably the Omicron variant of the pandemic,” Charles said. “And for four or five days it was pretty bad. I was very sick. And I think I had told my wife it was the sickest I had ever been in my life. I did lose my sense of smell and things like that.”

Charles explained he was eventually able to overcome the initial infection, but continued to suffer from Long COVID symptoms for weeks. “I got out of bed and I started moving around, and just kind of life flowing back into my body again,” he explained. “But I had a lot of mucus and so forth in my throat and lungs that was coming up for probably six weeks or so, meaning the COVID lingered a long time. I mean I was pretty functional after about five or six days, but the effects were long-lasting. And you know, who knows whether or not there’s some vestige of Long COVID in that.”

Speaking of the response of the ruling class in the US to the pandemic, Charles said, “It’s appalling to me today to see us acting, to see this nation, this government acting against the science, against the ethics, basically changing the science to fit the desired outcome, which is sending people to work to make money for Wall Street. The lives of working people in this country are expendable. That’s very obvious to me. And corporate profits are sacrosanct, that’s the holy grail here. That’s the real

religion of this country.”

“And it’s very appalling to me to see people today just going about their business as if the pandemic no longer exists,” he added. “I mean, I recall when Biden was running against Trump he was very critical of Trump’s policies. And yet, when he was empowered, or put in office, he followed those same policies as Trump.

“You know, it’s fairy dust and magical thinking. There’s no science here. There’s no ethics. It’s just all about the profits. And people need to realize that. You know we don’t really have the freedom to impose sickness on other people. And it’s not that much of a hardship to wear a mask, to carry hand sanitizer, to maintain social distancing. I still do those things when I go to public places. I still wear a mask. I still take hand sanitizer. And I know people scoff at it.

“In the beginning of COVID, it was taken pretty seriously. I can recall that when you went to the grocery store, there were requirements to have masks in order to enter the store. The number of people permitted in the store at any given time was monitored and limited. And the social distancing, the minimum of six feet, was pretty strictly enforced early on. And a lot of people complained, but the vast majority, you know, they did the right thing, they wore their mask and they tried to keep the correct social distancing and tried to behave in such a way that would help limit the spread of the pandemic.

“But eventually, as time passed, one could see that all of the restrictions were dissipating. They stopped monitoring the number of people in the stores. The mask requirements were no longer mandatory, and now they are altogether nonexistent. And the government, including the CDC, has totally sold out the people. I mean, the purpose of the CDC should be to protect public health. It shouldn’t be to promote business. And it’s very plain to see that in this grotesque system that we have, profits matter more than the lives of people. I find that just appalling.”

“New variants will continuously emerge because there’s no control,” Charles warned. “It will never be endemic. COVID will never be endemic. That’s just a pipe dream. It’s just another lie. It’s unrestricted, so it’s just free to mutate to who knows how many forms. And we’re not even tracing it. We’re not even testing. The funding for COVID testing and tracing, all of that has dried up, and I think those funds are being diverted to war.”

Charles also spoke to the role played by nationalism in preventing an adequate response to the pandemic and the need for an internationalist perspective.

“The pandemic is global and the nation-states are nation-states, but we are attached ecologically to the global environment,” he said. “And so the nation-states are, in fact, an artificial creation of the human mind. They really do not exist in nature. Nature does not recognize artificial boundaries drawn on a map or a globe. Diseases, pandemics move freely from place to place because there’s global commerce and disease travels with commerce.”

“And then there’s climate change, which is also global,” he added. “It’s not limited to any particular nation-state. It affects every nation-state on the planet. Some more than others perhaps. It’s a global phenomenon and it has to be addressed globally. It can’t be addressed strictly within national boundaries.

“I think another striking feature about how governments responded to the pandemic, and I think it probably originated in the United States, was how well orchestrated the movements were around the world—these were coordinated responses—to send people back to work, to send people to face disease and death and to bring it into their homes and spread it in the schools. It was an orchestrated event. It’s too much to ask of chance that it just so happens that every nation-state followed the lead of the United States in saying the pandemic’s over. It’s nothing but a bad cold or the flu. And it’s endemic now. It’s safe to resume your lives.

“Meanwhile, people are dying and they’re not even counting the bodies

anymore. The hospitals aren't reporting the daily deaths from COVID and they're re-categorizing many of the deaths to make the numbers look more respectable. It's just a big cover-up. But the disease is there. It's present. It's spreading. It's global. And it will do its work. There's an old saying, you know, we may be through with COVID, but COVID is not through with us."

Charles noted the connections between the xenophobic attacks on China over the pandemic, expressed above all in the promotion of the Wuhan lab leak conspiracy theory, and the filthy anti-Russia campaign accompanying the imperialist war drive in Ukraine.

"The hate against Russia is just incredible, just propaganda. And the same thing is happening with China," he said. "It's pretty apparent with what's going on with Ukraine—US military officials have recently declared that what's going on in Ukraine is, in fact, a proxy war with Russia, instigated by the United States primarily.

"We all know that Russia is in the crosshairs now, but China is the next one to be in the crosshairs of US imperial wars. It's no secret that if you look at the Wolfowitz doctrine, and if you listen to some of these people, what they are saying today, that's the plan. Hate is directed against China for the same reason it is directed against Russia. The plan is for the US to have an imperial war with China when they get through with Russia, that is, if we don't all go up in a mushroom cloud."

"I think the pandemic and war are really manifestations of the same disease," he added, "and that disease is capitalism. The people in power, the ruling class, make the wars, and wars are fought by working class people and the poor. And in capitalism, the costs are socialized and foisted upon the working class and the poor and the profits are privatized. We saw this in the bailout of the Wall Street robber barons. Workers made all the sacrifices, but someone else collected the profits. Those who produce nothing and render no public service get rich on the back of the workers. It's never in the interests of the working class to fight in the imperial wars. There is nothing to gain and everything to lose.

"The US has been at war continuously for 30 years and there is no end in sight. Based upon our history of preemptive imperial wars of aggression, we have no moral authority whatsoever to accuse anyone of war crimes. Examples include the bombing of Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of countless democratically elected leaders around the world, from Chile to Syria, and even Ukraine."

As for the support being given by the various petty-bourgeois pseudo-left groups for the imperialist war drive and the arming of Ukraine, Charles declared, "Anyone who is in favor of this proxy war with Russia in Ukraine, being waged in Ukraine, cannot be identified as a socialist, because socialists are opposed to war. It's just plain and simple. You can't be a real socialist and support imperial wars."

Charles was one of the thousands of workers throughout the world who attended the International May Day Online Rally hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site* on May 1.

"Why do we tolerate the intolerable?" Charles asked. "How can we allow such economic disparity to continue? We must connect the dots and understand that the root cause of this grotesque inequality is rooted in the capitalist system. That is why I attended the WSWS May Day Rally and urge others who could not attend to view the recordings and study the contributions which were made. We must arouse working class consciousness on a global scale and turn that revolutionary energy into political action."

"The *World Socialist Web Site* is my primary source of news and information," he explained. "And the reason is that they truly analyze events. They utilize dialectics, the tools of Marxism. They hold conflicting ideas, and they resolve the conflicts by reasoning and logic and science. This is in stark contrast to what passes for journalism in the corporate media. There's historical context on the *World Socialist Web Site*. To me, the journalism at the *World Socialist Web Site* is emancipatory. It

empowers workers to see the truth, to hear the truth, and to know it. And I don't see that anywhere else in the media, certainly not in the corporate media. So it's my first choice."

To the workers throughout the world who might read his interview, Charles issued an appeal: "We're all in this together in the working class. We're different from the ruling class. We are a strong majority. And we have power. The only power anyone has over you is that which you permit them to have. We have to use the power we have. We have to organize. We have to stand strong. We have to abolish capitalism. We need socialism. The choice is between barbarism and socialism. And I think that choice is really a no brainer."



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