

New York-New Jersey cable workers strike against Spectrum

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An estimated 1,700 workers in New York City and in Bergen County, New Jersey are on strike against Spectrum, a provider of cable television, internet and voice services. The striking field technicians, warehouse workers and engineering department workers are opposing company demands to shift the cost of health care and pensions onto workers, as well as the elimination of funding for union provided benefits.

The workers who are members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 3 have been working without a contract since 2013. The company was known as Time Warner cable prior to its purchase by Charter Communications in 2016. It has roughly 2.5 million residential and business subscribers in its New York area.

As in the strike by 39,000 Verizon workers a year ago one of the primary issues is the disciplinary action the company is using against workers. At issue is the rate of “repeaters” a technician may have—that is, the reoccurrence of a trouble condition within a given period after a previous repair dispatch.

“Repeaters” are often beyond the control of the technician. The technicians who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site Telecom Workers Newsletter* said they are often blamed for problems that arise from the company cutting corners. Repeaters, they said, are frequently caused by faulty or outdated equipment in the field, which is failing after years of inadequate maintenance. In some cases, complaints about internet speeds are simply the result of the company not building out enough capacity in growing neighborhoods. All of this is the result of the cost-cutting to boost short-term earnings and share values.

In February of this year, New York State Attorney General Eric Schniederman filed a lawsuit against

Charter Communications and its Spectrum-TWC subsidiary for allegedly misleading and defrauding customers for promising internet service the company knew it couldn’t provide over its network.

One worker in Manhattan, who wished to remain anonymous, said, “Our engineering team said it wasn’t possible for the network to run at the speed the company is saying, but we are being blamed for the speed. There is also old language in the contract that was never applied before, and now has become very important.”

Another worker on the picket line in Queens, New York said “micromanagement” is a problem. “We could do better if they would just leave us alone. Instead they try to micromanage everything we do. They track our position all day with GPS. We have to answer for every move we make often being second-guessed by a manager who doesn’t understand conditions in the field.”

As in logistics, transportation and other industries, technology is used to monitor, harass and discipline telecom workers to maximize productivity. This monitoring creates a very stressful work environment for workers who are made to account for every second of time.

As the WSWWS recently wrote, science and technology has made it possible “to secure a decent standard of living for every person on this planet” but under the profit system “technology is made the instrument of repression.”

The telecoms are all demanding painful concessions even as they squander billions on mergers and acquisitions, stock buyback programs and dividend payments to further enrich their top stock holders. The \$79 billion acquisition of Time Warner Cable by Charter Communications in 2015 is part of a decades-

long process of consolidation, which has resulted in a cartel of large corporations controlling internet, television, voice, or, in short, all telecom service in the United States and internationally.

AT&T and Time Warner Inc., which is a separate company from Time Warner Cable, are still working towards a merger and Verizon recently purchased XO Communications, while it has announced it is “open to” merger talks with Disney. There is also speculation that Google may be planning on purchasing Verizon’s landline network.

This process, which has led to the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs and wave after wave of concessions, has generated enormous windfalls for some. Charter Communications CEO Tom Rutledge was awarded a total compensation package last year valued at an estimated \$98.5 million.

Several striking workers commented on the lack of media coverage of their strike. The corporate media, which has deep connections with the telecom industry, has no interest in spreading news of the strike for fear it would encourage militancy within other sections of the working class.

As for its role, IBEW Local 3 has kept the workers isolated and news of the strike suppressed. There have been token shows of support by various bureaucrats from other unions, notably the Communications Workers of America (CWA), which represents hundreds of thousands of workers nationally at Verizon, AT&T and other telecom companies.

The CWA and IBEW, which covered workers in New England, were complicit in the betrayal of last year’s Verizon strike, which led to increases in health care costs and the destruction of jobs. Local 3 kept Spectrum workers on the job without a contract last year and did not bring them to join the Verizon strikers. Far from working for the unity of the telecom workers, IBEW and CWA have pit their respective members against one another, particularly in telecom premise wiring in New York City.

“We should all go on strike together,” a picket in Manhattan said. “If we were all out it would go a lot faster. The CWA and IBEW should be out together.” Far from taking such action, a worker noted that the IBEW has made members stay on the job even as others walk the picket lines. “There is another [IBEW] local that works here. They had contract issues a while

back and we supported them but we still had to go to work. Now we are on strike and they are working.”

If this fight is not to be defeated and sold out like the Verizon strike, then workers must take the conduct of the struggle in their own hands. They should elect rank-and-file committees, independent of the IBEW and other unions, utilize social media to establish lines of communication with all other telecom workers, and fight for the broadest mobilization of all workers to back their struggle.

New York City is seething with class tensions over the immense level of inequality. A serious appeal to the working class throughout the city will win widespread support from workers and young people opposed to inequality and the Trump administration’s attack on immigrants and threats of war.

Telecom services are a vital necessity for the millions of people who rely on them and those who are employed in the industry. This sector must not remain subordinate to the dictates of finance capital and the vicissitudes of the market. To ensure social needs are met, the telecom industry, along with other vital industries, must be nationalized and placed under the collective ownership and democratic control of the working class.



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