

US telecom unions continue isolation of Spectrum strike

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The strike of 1,800 field technicians, warehouse workers and engineering department workers against the Spectrum cable company in New York City and northern New Jersey has gone on for two and a half months. The mass media continues to ignore an important industrial struggle in the largest city in the US. Meanwhile, a multimillion-dollar advertising campaign is being carried on by Spectrum, which has about 2.5 million residential and business subscribers. The company was known as Time Warner cable prior to its purchase by Charter Communications in 2016.

The workers, members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 3, have been working without a contract since 2013. They are opposing company demands to shift the cost of health care and pensions onto their shoulders. In addition, workers are often disciplined for problems arising from the company's cost-cutting measures.

The strike takes place under conditions of continuing attacks on telecommunication workers. Verizon announced this week that it would lay off 2,100 employees as it takes over Yahoo and combines it with AOL, both of which have carried out repeated layoffs.

In May the Communications Workers of America (CWA) called out AT&T workers in a token three-day strike. It ordered a return to work despite the fact that 21,000 wireless workers in 36 states are still without a contract.

Meanwhile, the telecom unions have done nothing to mobilize the millions of workers in New York behind the Spectrum strike. Instead, the IBEW has focused on lobbying Democratic politicians, such as New York Mayor Bill De Blasio, claiming they can be pressured into supporting the strike. In fact, de Blasio played a rotten role during the 2016 Verizon strike, sending police to escort scabs past picketing workers to enforce

an injunction imposed by a National Labor Relations Board appointed by the Democratic Obama administration.

This strategy has left workers defenseless as scabs hired by Spectrum are being used to break the strike. The treacherous role played by the IBEW is illustrated by the fact that the union did not mobilize Spectrum workers, who were without a contract at the time, to join the Verizon workers during their 2016 strike, which resulted in the imposition of higher health plan costs and increased job insecurity.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and its *Telecommunications Workers Newsletter* has called on rank-and-file telecom workers to form committees independent of the unions to spearhead a fight against job cuts and concessions and to unite workers in joint industrial and political action.

The WSWS spoke with workers on the picket line in front of the Spectrum center on 5th Avenue in Brooklyn.

Emmett Hardy, with 18 years' service, explained, "I knew something like the Verizon offer was going to happen. Then, Verizon went on to outbid everyone and buy out Straight Path. Straight Path owned the high frequency pathways that make 5G possible. The 5G networks are not being offered now, but this is where the future profits are because the 5G network will be faster. AT&T offered \$1.6 billion, and it looked like the deal was going through, but Straight Path felt they could get more. They held out for more, and Verizon has just bought Straight Path for \$3.1 billion. A year ago, Charter, the number three cable company in the country, bought out Time Warner Cable, the number two cable company, for about \$70 billion, and now we are on strike.

"I think our situation is connected with the

elimination of net neutrality as well. I think this is because at City Council last week, when Spectrum was asked whether they were in favor of net neutrality, they talked around it and didn't answer the question.

"With these deals and the money making elimination of net neutrality, nobody says anything about the 1,800 workers on strike. I think they are all in this together. They are rich now and getting richer. But they won't pay us.

"Between the corporate greed and the unions, the workers are in the middle, and we take the hit."

Ricardo Dopson, also on the Brooklyn picket, condemned the government aid for Spectrum: "I saw that the unemployment board posted a list of jobs for Spectrum for a job fair held June 1st. They even told workers applying that these were union jobs, even though the union is on strike.

"I talked to a tech, who has turned scab. Management had sent forms to us before the strike for resigning from the union to send back to them so that we could keep working during the strike. This person was told he didn't have to send the letter but could come in anyway. I have seen they have brought in scab replacements from Illinois, Rhode Island, Texas, California, Florida and Georgia.

"The police are helping the company. The police told the pickets at the other line in Brooklyn on Paige Avenue that covers the work for South Manhattan that they had to stop using their whistles and drums even though it is an industrial area. They cordoned off the legal parking spots there to make it harder for us, even though it is a dead-end street. Spectrum is powerful."

Asked about the political issues facing the working class faces, Dopson explained, "The corporations basically have taken over the government. They had a meeting of the G7 summit. It was to decide who stays poor. That is world dominance. Arizona, New Mexico, in the desert they could provide solar power that would be enough for the entire country. But the oil companies don't want that.

"The CEO of Spectrum, Rutledge, met with Trump and said he will create 20,000 jobs in the next four or five years. But he laid off 10,000. Call centers are shutting down right through the country. They are claiming they create jobs. But they are trying to get rid of me if I am making \$42 an hour. Then they hire four guys for a low wage and say they created jobs.

Asked about the scapegoating of immigrants, he said, "Why pick on the Mexicans? Why build a wall instead of schools? Instead they build prisons.

"Since Reagan, it is all about the rich. No politicians mention the poor. They only mention the rich and the middle class. A lot of poor don't vote anymore because they realize no one cares about them."

Bryan Campbell, with 13 years, also spoke to the WSWS. Asked about the leadership and strategy of the strike, Campbell related, "Growing up, all you know is a union. That is what your parents told you would save you from these situations. If there was something better, I'm sure the whole working class would go for it. The working class having its own party is a good idea."

At the IBEW picket line on 96th Street and Broadway in Manhattan, Juan Diaz told the WSWS, "Spectrum has hired 300 to 400 scabs, some from prison work release programs. They put them to work with only two weeks training, although 12 weeks is needed to train regular Spectrum workers. Training for field technicians is even longer, 16 weeks.

"I think that Charter Communications is forcing the strike because they want to sell Spectrum. Comcast had wanted to buy Spectrum but was blocked by the government with an anti-trust charge because Comcast was already the largest US cable-TV company. Charter Communications, only the fifth largest telecom company in the US, then bought Time-Warner, the second largest, changing the name to Spectrum.

"Where did Charter get the money for that? Comcast? Maybe they think they will be allowed to buy Spectrum now that Trump is in. Comcast wants to control all the major cities. There are commercials on TV for Comcast in New York even though they have no footprint here yet. I am concerned for what happens when Spectrum gets sold. We will be out of our benefits plans."



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