

Spectrum strike approaches half year mark

Daniel de Vries
26 September 2017

Thursday will mark six months on strike for approximately 1,800 Spectrum technicians, engineers and warehouse workers, continuing what is now the longest walkout by telecommunications workers in decades.

This milestone underscores the determination of workers at the nation's second largest cable company to fight attempts to eviscerate their pensions and stop payments to their health care fund. The workers in New York and New Jersey are taking a stand amid a broader, multi-decade offensive by Wall Street and big business across the country and internationally to redistribute vast wealth to the coffers of the super rich.

Charter Communications CEO Tom Rutledge personifies this trend, siphoning off at least \$78 million in personal compensation last year after the company bought out Time Warner Cable. (Charter operates under the brand name Spectrum). That number could rise to nearly \$100 million if Charter meets targets for share prices, filling the pockets of Wall Street investors at the expense of workers.

However the extended character of the struggle points to the need for workers to take careful stock of their situation. The strategy of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and the Communication Workers of America has been based on the deliberate isolation of the Spectrum strike, directing workers' efforts, not towards mobilizing the millions of other workers facing similar attacks, but instead encouraging false hopes in Democratic Party politicians.

One of the defining features of the strike thus far has been an information blackout. What few pieces appear in the newspapers and on television often parrot baseless accusations against strikers of sabotage, blaming them for infrastructure and service problems, which are on the rise with the use of unqualified strikebreakers rather than the professional staff on the picket line.

However the blackout is not only on the part of the corporate media. The union website set up for the strike has not been updated in over a month; the Facebook page has just one official post since April. "We have been left in the dark for six months by the Democrats and the union," Jesus Delacruz, a Spectrum striker told the *World Socialist Web Site* at a rally last week. "We, as the strikers, have pushed forward."

The rally last week was one of only a handful of events organized by the unions over the past six months. The demonstration and march over the Brooklyn Bridge, while attracting several thousand workers, was aimed at providing a platform for New York governor Andrew Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio.

Cuomo, who has overseen attacks on state workers' pensions and health care, offered strikers nothing but empty bombast. "We demand wages, health care and pensions. The union is the equalizing force at the bargaining table. Spectrum is trying to take away things. It is not going to happen."

Cuomo also touted the imposition of what amounts to a token penalty of \$13 million for Spectrum's failure to meet broadband expansion milestones as if it were a major accomplishment. Last year the company's net income reached \$3.5 billion.

AFL-CIO officials, including national president Richard Trumka, took turns praising Cuomo as a supposed friend of labor. Trumka's words should immediately arouse suspicion. Up until last month he participated in President Trump's manufacturing council, until the president's support for the fascist rampage in Charlottesville, Virginia made this untenable.

For his part, mayor de Blasio repeated his offer to meet with the union and the company at City Hall, an empty proposal that Spectrum has rejected outright. Upon taking office in 2014, de Blasio pushed through

concessions contracts with the collaboration of the unions for hundreds of thousands of city workers, forcing them to pay substantially more for health coverage. And despite his proclamations of support, he made clear his hostility to the striking workers by participating the previous week in the Democratic primary debate on broadcast on Spectrum's local news channel, NY1.

The Democratic Party has collaborated with Republicans at the local, state and national level to dismantle the very benefits the striking workers are fighting to protect. President Obama's Affordable Care Act was primarily directed at allowing companies to push workers onto private exchanges, rather than continue employer-based coverage. Not as well publicized, but nonetheless highly significant, Obama also pushed through legal reforms in 2014 to allow the cutting of pension payments to retirees who, like Spectrum workers, are covered by multi-employer pension funds.

Workers should reject the illusions in the Democratic Party being promoted by the IBEW and the AFL-CIO. The Democratic Party and the unions have together sought to suppress workers struggles and, where strikes have broken out, to maintain their isolation.

There is broad sympathy for the Spectrum strike in the working class. Larry Amandola, an IBEW Local 3 construction worker marching last week in support of Spectrum workers, told the WSWS, "I think it is criminal what Charter/Spectrum is doing to those workers. Every worker, everyone has a right to medical and pensions."

Rob Martino, a Local 3 electrical construction worker with a journeyman status, declared his support for the strikers. "People just want to pay their bills, but they make it harder and harder. The economy has not come back since 2008. We are hard-working people, not outlaws."

The struggle to secure, after a lifetime of work, a retirement outside of poverty, with access to health care and a modicum of dignity, cannot be advanced unless the isolation of the Spectrum strike by the unions is broken. This requires that workers mobilize independently of the union apparatus through the construction of a rank-and-file committee. Workers must seize the initiative to call for the broadest mobilization possible of fellow telecommunications

and other workers throughout the region.

We urge workers to contact the WSWS to discuss the new strategy required to advance their struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact