

Telecom unions lead Charter-Spectrum strike into dead end

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Eighteen hundred telecom workers have been on strike against Charter Communications-Spectrum in New York City and northern New Jersey for nearly eight months. While the striking workers have demonstrated their determination to fight and enormous self-sacrifice, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) and other unions have led these workers into a dead end.

The strike was provoked when Charter-Spectrum, formerly Time Warner Cable, demanded elimination of its pension and hospitalization plan contributions, reduction in medical benefits, elimination of overtime pay for Saturday and Sunday, and reduction of holidays from 9 to 7. Having taken the measure of the union, which has left the strikers isolated, the company has refused to budge on nearly all of its takeaway demands. The intervention of a federal mediator, hailed by the IBEW, has done nothing to change the situation.

Strikers have been forced to subsist on starvation rations. IBEW Local 3, whose top four executives average \$183,000 in salary, plus perks, paid out a weekly strike benefit of \$150 until unemployment benefits kicked in eight weeks after the walkout began. Now the miserly unemployment benefits are set to expire at the end of December. Most workers have been forced to take other jobs, often at Uber or Amazon, to pay their bills.

On November 9, the local union executives voted to assess members of the Construction Division of Local 3, which is not on strike, a half percent of their paychecks to provide a strike benefit to Spectrum workers that would be “approximate” to unemployment benefits.

Although the IBEW has 662,000 members and Local 3 itself has 27,000, the union has forced the Spectrum workers to fight this battle alone. In fact, during the

strike Spectrum has gotten work done by contracted companies with employees who are members of Local 3’s other division. This despite the fact that as part of a multiemployer pension fund, all divisions of Local 3 have pensions and medical funds under the same Joint Industrial Board (JIB). The company’s threat to liquidate the Spectrum fund could weaken and potentially bankrupt the JIB for 90,000 members.

Felix Alvarez, an electrician in the Local 3 construction division for 19 years, spoke to the *WSWS Telecom Worker Newsletter* at an October 30 Times Square rally for the Spectrum strikers, which was attended by around 3,000 workers, mostly from the local’s construction division. “It affects all 90,000 pensions when Spectrum stopped paying into JIB. The pensions are not that big to start with, and if they cut 30 percent like they did with the Teamsters, it is a tragedy. This is why a lot of people have to go back to work. They can’t afford to retire because the cost of living keeps going up. I think there should be a strike by all of Local 3. I don’t think Spectrum will hold negotiations until there are more strikes.”

Nick Volpe, a construction electrician in IBEW Local 3, told the WSWS, “These rallies are well and good, but it is not helping the Spectrum strikers who have been out for more than seven months. All we know is that we have these rallies. We have had a few, and there have been no results. Spectrum is just saying, ‘So what?’ I don’t think they are even in negotiations.”

At the monthly rallies, the Central Labor Council and the AFL-CIO have only brought out a token presence of New York’s large workforce and have used the events as photo-ops for Democratic Party politicians. Present on the platform was Chris Shelton, president of the Communications Workers of America (CWA), the largest telecom union, which betrayed the six-week-

long strike by nearly 40,000 Verizon workers last year. The CWA and the IBEW have blocked any unified struggle against the Verizon, AT&T and other firms even though these highly profitable corporate giants are waging a common war against the jobs, living standards and working conditions of workers throughout the industry.

New York City Public Advocate Letitia James postured as a militant in order to promote the lie that the Democrats and Mayor Bill de Blasio are friends of the striking workers. She shocked union officials by shouting out that the workers of the city need to “shut it down!” Christopher Erikson, the Local 3 Business Manager, nervously responded, “I didn’t say that.”

The IBEW is now fashioning ways to wind down the strike. In October, Local 3 announced an apprenticeship program open to Spectrum strikers that would train them for potential electrical jobs at city and state construction sites. The four-year on-the-job apprenticeship program would mean the strikers would suffer drastic wage cuts while still having to pay union dues. In any case, many of the strikers with over twenty years of experience would not have the time left to make a return to apprenticeship worthwhile.

Local 3 waited three years after the last contract expired, sabotaging the opportunity for joint industrial action during the Verizon strike. It only called a strike when Spectrum decided to stop payments into the IBEW pension fund, which the union executives consider a threat to their income and business opportunities.

The IBEW and other unions are in an anti-working-class alliance with the Democrats who, no less than the Republicans, have carried out a decades-long war against the working class. New York is seething with social inequality, with a soaring stock market and real estate boom fueling the fortunes of billionaires like Donald Trump and ex-Mayor Michael Bloomberg while the majority of workers are struggling with rising health care, education and housing costs, along with stagnant or falling real wages.

Governor Andrew Cuomo and Mayor de Blasio, both Democrats, have shown themselves to be tools of Wall Street, but were given platforms at the September 16 rally in Brooklyn. Cuomo is remembered by state workers for threatening them with layoffs if they did not accept reduced pensions, a key issue in the

Spectrum strike.

De Blasio announced “support” for Local 3 during an interview with the Spectrum-owned TV channel New York One. However, his real attitude toward workers was clearly revealed during the 2016 Verizon strike, when he enforced the injunction against the striking workers and sent city police to shepherd scab workers through the picket lines.

The only way forward is to break free from the stranglehold of the union. Workers must form their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracy and reach out broadly for real support from telecom and other workers in the region. At the same time, the working class requires a new political strategy, based on a break with both corporate-controlled parties and the building of a mass political movement of the working class to fight for a socialist program, including the transformation of the telecommunications industry into a public enterprise collectively owned and democratically controlled by workers themselves.

The Socialist Equality Party and *WSWS Telecom Worker Newsletter* urge Spectrum and other workers to contact us and build the necessary leadership to take forward this fight.

The authors also recommend:

Seven-month Spectrum strike in New York and New Jersey highlights assault on pensions
[30 October 2017]

Lessons of the Verizon strike
[2 June 2016]



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