

”With these mergers, they just grab the money and go on to the next business target”

Striking Spectrum workers in New York express anger after a month on strike

By Steve Light and Alan Whyte
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Two thousand technicians have been on strike for a month in New York City and nearby New Jersey against Spectrum, formerly Time Warner Cable, which was acquired by Charter Communications in a \$65 billion mega-merger in 2016. Spectrum, one of the largest providers of telephone, Internet and cable TV services in the country, wants to shift the costs of health care and pensions onto workers. Workers are also fighting the company’s practice of disciplining them for customer problems caused by Spectrum’s failure to carry out infrastructure repairs and improvements.

While striking workers have shown determination to beat back an attack on their jobs and benefits, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and other unions have isolated the strike. If Spectrum strikers do not take matters into their own hands they will face the same fate as 40,000 Verizon workers whose six-week strike was betrayed by the CWA in 2016, resulting in a sweeping attack on their health care benefits and jobs.

IBEW Local 3 officials have told workers to look to Democratic politicians supported by the union, including Governor Andrew Cuomo’s state attorney general Eric Schneiderman, who is currently suing Spectrum over fraudulent claims about the speed of their Internet service. However, the Democrats, no less than Trump and the Republicans, are the political servants of the telecom giants and Wall Street and appeals to these big-business politicians are fruitless and destructive. Instead Spectrum workers should turn for support to the millions of workers in the New York-New Jersey area who have seen a steady decline in their living standards while the profits of the corporations and stock market swindlers have soared.

Even as Spectrum workers strike, the intense anger of workers in New York City, one of the most socially unequal cities in the world, is being expressed. An article in Tuesday’s *New York Daily News*, titled, “Labor strife is all around New York City prior to May Day celebration” points to several strikes and brewing labor struggles in the metropolitan area.

This includes drivers and warehouse workers for Clare Rose, a Budweiser beer distributing company based on Long Island, who are on strike against the company’s demand for a 30 percent wage cut and the end of their pension. Other workers, also members of the Teamsters union, are striking Alside Supply Center in Bethpage, Long Island. Nurses and healthcare workers at Fresenius Dialysis in New York have authorized a strike after two years of negotiations. The Writers Guild of America, whose members work for production companies of many popular TV shows, have voted to strike by May 2 on the east and west coasts. Workers in the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union branch of Bloomingdale’s Department Store in mid-Manhattan have voted to strike

Monday if there is no progress in contract talks.

Then there are millions of workers, native-born and immigrant, who are outside of the company-controlled unions and who toil in service and other industries and who make barely enough to survive in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

The *World Socialist Web Site Telecom Worker Newsletter* spoke to striking Spectrum technicians walking picket lines in New York City. They are penned up behind police barricades that have been used to isolate and suppress the democratic rights of New York workers and protesters since the 1990s.

Many workers spoke about corporate profits, conditions of disciplinary harassment, and the attempt by Spectrum to take away existing benefits. At the picket line on 23rd Street in mid-Manhattan, the picket captain told the WSWs, “The strike is because of corporate greed. Issues revolve around quality of work. We want them to stop reprimanding us because of faulty infrastructure. They blame the technicians but if there are failing modem speeds that’s because they don’t put in the necessary equipment. Reprimanding technicians holds them back. Schneiderman is suing them because they bought equipment that was inadequate and not giving the speeds they claimed. It is the workers who built the company but they forced us out on strike while the CEOs are getting their bonuses.

“Another issue is we want the contract clause grandfathered in permanently that, before the layoff of permanent workers, they have to stop contracting out positions. Many here on strike have 30 years like me, or eighteen years. The Spectrum CEO has only been here for a year. With the mergers of companies, they just grab the money and go on to the next business target.

“They want outside contractors. With those, they pay per job but don’t have to pay them benefits or supply a vehicle, uniform, or tools. In the last four years, they have hired technicians brought in from Pennsylvania and Florida who float around the country from job to job.

“Progression is another issue. This is so you don’t have to wait for someone to die before you can move up. Technicians are kept from progression because of “repeaters” (going back to a customer due to a complaint after a service call). You take a course to learn more and improve your wage and then another course and so on. They come up with reasons of on-time, or call complaints that force repeat visits, and do not let you move up. The company was hiring hundreds of new technicians before now. This was because so many were reprimanded and quitting. Their pay was not rising above \$10. You can’t live in New York like that.”

On the picket line at 96th Street and Broadway on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, Dennis Burgess [PHOTO], a technician for 11 years with

Spectrum, told the WSWs about pressure and harassment. “When I step into your apartment on a service call, I know what I am doing A to Z. If there is a problem, they give you 30 days to call, for anything. It may be that your grandchild breaks the remote control and the customer calls within 30 days. I take the hit even if it is not my fault.

“We have not had a contract since 2013. They negotiate in bad faith. They want to give about \$6 for a wage increase but then take away—not contribute to the pension, have us pay the medical, take away FICA (Social Security and Medicare taxes), stop contributing to our 401(K).”

Jeffrey Sosa, with eight years at Spectrum, declared, “Charter is in 41 states with Internet, voice, and TV, and the CEO made \$98.2 million last year. But he does not want to give us our benefits. Their profits are off of our backs. They want to remove union representation. If a technician is disciplined, they want the worker to meet with management behind closed doors without a union rep. They want to be able to fire people on the spot.”

When the WSWs reporter pointed out the similarity of Spectrum’s attacks to those of other corporations and industries, such as tiered wages and benefits imposed on autoworkers, another worker added, “We have a five-tier wage system. Even if you qualify, meet all the requirements, get the needed certification to move up for your progression, then it is still up to management if you do. There can be favoritism. They try to keep you quiet.”

Angel Rizzo, who has also worked at Spectrum for 15 years, remarked about the political climate of attacks on the working class, “This crosses party lines—Democrats and Republicans.” Looking around at the gentrified high-rise buildings on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, the striking worker observed, “In New York City, it’s a shame we cannot afford to live in these apartments.”

At the 219th Street Spectrum center that dispatches technicians for northern Manhattan, Richard Shabman [PHOTO], a plant maintainer who has worked as a technician for 37 years, spoke to the WSWs. “The company wants to take away things like pensions, health benefits, paid holidays. They want you to pay for Social Security, which we never had to do before. That would amount to a reduction of \$150 out of a worker’s pay.

“The equipment that this company has is outdated. It is all refurbished or recycled. They have not updated their equipment since 1992. Customers are paying for 300 megabytes, but they are not getting that at all. Their operating speeds are very slow. Half the buildings that they service are not properly wired. I am talking about the buildings in the lower income brackets.

“The last time we went out on strike was in 1972. We didn’t have to strike in all this time until now. Things started to change in the mid-1980s. They have fired a lot of technicians blaming them for not fixing problems that really are due to the failure of the company’s inferior equipment. We have not had a new contract since 2013. Time Warner Cable hired Robert Marcus in 2012 as CEO. After the merger with Charter Communications, he walked away with \$105 million through his shares.

“The development of technology over the decades has convinced companies that they can get rid of technicians because the system is self-maintained. I am saying that this is not true. You still need a technician to keep the system going.”

Tatiana Cabezas, a shop steward, compared the attack on Spectrum workers to the conditions in developing economies. “A girlfriend in Ecuador makes only \$325 a month. She has to pay for her own medical, gets no overtime, works Saturdays, works until 9 p.m., and if you do not show up, they fire you. It is corporate greed that they want the same type of conditions here. They want to get rid of our FICA, pensions, annuity, educational fund. A scab technician working at Spectrum told me that they are being told to work until 2 a.m. without overtime.

“They want the national minimum wage to be \$15. So technicians will make the same as at McDonald’s. In McDonald’s they are now putting in computers to replace workers. We have skills. But Spectrum does not even maintain their system. It is like Verizon, not investing in new copper cable.

“They give \$98.5 million to the CEO but they want to take away the bonuses we have to work for. It used to be given if you showed up but now they use standards they know we are unable to meet. They are now hiring from Work Force One, Craig’s List, which hires without giving proper training and background checks.”

Asked about the political system backing the corporations, Tatiana replied, “In this country, it is about who has the money. That is why our strike is in a media blackout. We have a system that is not about the working people. Rents in New York are sky high, but wages are the same. The \$7.25 minimum wage is not yet bumped up. This government wants to keep the middleman down. The working class is what makes this country work. I would be in favor of a working-class party that you are talking about because that takes the working-class necessities into account. Instead of companies that are like cable monopolies, they should be all public-controlled.”

Perscholas Aviles, a technician of 15 years’ experience, responded to a WSWs reporter asking how they could avoid a similar result to the Verizon strike that made concessions on health care and job security. “It is a shame. We hope we don’t have that. We had rallies. They want to get rid of the union, especially the franchise agreement where they have to hire local union labor. But they are bringing in labor from elsewhere. The comptroller Scott Stringer says he is looking into Spectrum. The problem for them is now the mayor will have two thousand people on unemployment insurance. I don’t think they want that,” Perscholas said, expressing some illusions in the Democrats, which has been promoted by the union.

Perscholas added, “If we could band together with other workers, sanitation, teachers, that would be the thing. Electrical Workers Local 3 is affiliated with the AFL-CIO and the Verizon union. Are they thinking about it? The advantage of Local 3 is this union has not had a layoff in 75 years, except for management [when Comcast was trying unsuccessfully to take over Time Warner]. But now they are trying to get the unions. They could hire three or four people on our present salaries, a journeymen’s wage.

“With Charter coming in, they want us to pay for our medical, that now they pay. Time Warner has for forty years paid FICA. That is \$3.50 more above wage. They want to end the educational fund of \$10,000 that you could use for yourself, your wife, your children, and take away our birthdays and holidays.”

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