

“The working class has to stand together against this”

After five months on strike, Spectrum workers in New York-New Jersey must break union-imposed isolation

By Alan Whyte, A. Woodson and Steve Light
1 September 2017

A strike by 1,800 technicians and engineers in New York and New Jersey against the telecom giant Charter Communications, also known as Spectrum, is now more than five months old. The company, which sells cable, Internet, and telephone services in the hugely profitable New York metropolitan area, remains intransigent in its drive to eliminate defined pension benefits and impose draconian health care cuts.

The workers, who are members of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 3, walked off their jobs on March 28 after working without a contract since 2013. The IBEW and the much larger telecom union, the Communications Workers of America (CWA), have forced the striking workers to battle the huge corporation on their own, keeping tens of thousands of workers at Verizon, AT&T and other telecom companies on the job even though they face the same attacks.

According to NYCableTruth, the IBEW has offered several cost-saving proposals amounting to millions of dollars in concessions, including eliminating Spectrum’s contribution to a 401 (K) pension plan in order to maintain the union-run pension and retiree health care scheme. On August 29, at the latest meeting between the two sides, the company insisted once again that it was abandoning its traditional defined-benefit pension plan.

Other givebacks Spectrum is demanding include eliminating the Social Security agreement that amounts to 7.6 percent of workers’ salary, ending overtime pay for weekends, reducing holidays from nine to seven days, and eliminating the Educational and Cultural Trust Fund.

Charter, with more than 26 million customers in 41 states, is the second largest and fastest growing provider in the country. The company established itself in New York City in May 2016, when it paid more than \$70 billion to acquire the franchise rights of Bright House Networks and Time Warner Cable. It owns New York 1, a major cable local news service.

On August 26, a coalition of New York unions held a march over the George Washington Bridge, which connects New

Jersey and New York, in an effort to shore up the credibility of the unions, which are carrying out a miserable betrayal of the strike. The New York City Central Labor Council organized a mere 200-300 participants, even though it allegedly “represents” 1.3 million workers.

The unions are allied with the Democratic Party, which, along with the Republicans, has overseen decades of budget cutting, handouts to Wall Street and real estate developers, including the current billionaire occupant of the White House, and an explosion of social inequality. The Democrats have relied on the city unions to suppress the class struggle, and if they are unable to stop strikes—such as the New York City school bus drivers’ struggle in 2013 and the Verizon workers strike in 2016—then to isolate and defeat them.

The IBEW is encouraging a sickly dependence on Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio, who has feigned support for the striking workers. The mayor says he is investigating whether Charter has broken a franchise agreement by hiring out-of-state strikebreakers.

Such meaningless maneuvers have long been the stock-in-trade of de Blasio, who, as a candidate for mayor in 2013, said he would “revisit” Republican Mayor Bloomberg’s decision to strip striking school bus drivers and matrons of long-standing job security protections. This provided a cover for the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 to shut down the month-long walkout by 9,000 school bus workers on management’s terms. More than four years later job protections have not been restored and thousands of workers remain out of work.

Hostile to any genuine mobilization of the working class—which would quickly escalate into a political confrontation with de Blasio, New York’s Democratic governor Andrew Cuomo and others—the unions advanced an impotent tactic of consumer boycotts. The president of the Uniformed Firefighters Association, Gerald Fitzgerald, said if the cable giant did not settle soon he would appeal to his 8,500

members to seek the services of another company.

Throughout the strike Spectrum has run a multi-million dollar television ad campaign, including during New York Yankees baseball games, to give the impression that it is running its business as usual. Due to the isolation of the struggle by the unions, the vast majority of New Yorkers do not even know Spectrum workers are on strike.

The main concern of the IBEW bureaucracy is protecting its union-run pension plan—a lucrative investment vehicle—by demonstrating to management that it can be relied on to suppress worker resistance to the company's dictates. The number of workers on picket lines has fallen because many workers, being starved into submission by the union, have been forced to take other jobs to keep from losing their homes.

At the picket of the Spectrum storefront on West 96th Street and Broadway, Jose Milian, a foreman who will have 27 years' experience as of September, said, "I have three kids in college. I have to go into my savings, my 401(K). But crossing [the picket line] is not an option.

"The company is so greedy. All we are asking is to keep what we have. The rate increase does not come close to what they want to take away. It's like a \$1 raise, but taking \$10. We are also out here because of their harassment, writing you up to make you fail. They have a system where if you meet a point target, you would be rewarded, but then you are not because they keep changing the numbers.

"They are trying to get rid of people who have 15 or 20 years because they feel they are getting too much pay. They would rather hire two students just out of high school and pay them nothing. They are willing to jeopardize the company's reputation and endanger customers by hiring people from Craig's List, and without a background check."

Angered over the lack of support from the unions, Jose said, "We have not been on strike for 40 years. There must be millions in the strike fund. They should be giving it to us so we can stay on the picket line, not work elsewhere." He added, "We are realizing now we have no protection because the union is relying on the politicians."

Joe, a journeyman technician, told the WSWs, "I feel the workers don't really have a say in this strike. The union has a multi-employer pension and health care fund called the Joint Industry Board of the Electrical Industry, or JIB, which the union manages. Charter/Spectrum wants to stop paying into the fund. The disadvantage of the Charter/Spectrum 401(k) pension plan is that you lose your health care when you retire.

"What the union's interest is in keeping the union-managed JIB pension and health care fund is a major issue. My understanding is the pension fund covers 90,000 IBEW workers in the US and Canada, including workers at Johnson Controls and General Electric, and 25 percent of the unionized Verizon workforce who are in the IBEW.

"If Charter/Spectrum wins this fight and the union loses their payments into the JIB, every other company would do the same

thing and the fund would fail. But the union's reason for fighting so hard over the JIB fund is because with all the money the other companies pay in, I'm sure the union makes a profit somewhere along the line.

"The union has to be taking management fees, and they must be substantial. IBEW Local 3 has its own administrators for the JIB. They also have a union medical clinic with eye doctors and other specialists. The union makes a lot of money from the JIB funds, but at the end of the day, we, the workers, are the ones out here. We are the soldiers."

Harody Cordones, an apprentice technician with 17 years, said, "It is hard being out of work for five months with four kids, and we don't have any conclusion yet. The company offered a 22 percent wage increase spread over the different Technician levels, but the main issue is they are trying to get out of the JIB pension and medical plan.

"It is not true that de Blasio supports us. He is making those promises to support us on the company's media station—New York 1. We are in the same position as we were when we started. There has been nothing from the union, or the Democrats on City Council, or the mayor.

"The other 90,000 members in our JIB pension/health care fund and the CWA should go on strike with us because their company is going to do the same thing as Charter/Spectrum. We should close down construction in New York City. We should close down Johnson Controls and General Electric because we need to fix this. However, it is not happening because the union isn't calling for it.

"The working class has to stand together against this. We have to spread the strike. All the workers have to stick together."

The WSWs *Telecom Workers Newsletter* urges Spectrum workers to form rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of this struggle out of the hands of the pro-company unions. These committees should fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class throughout the New York-New Jersey area to oppose the attacks of big business and its political servants. To take up this fight we urge workers to subscribe to the newsletter and join our Facebook page.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>