

Local 3 Strike vs. Charter

# Public-Employee Unions Rally for Cable Workers

A broad coalition of public-employee unions, concerned about the toll taken by the five-month strike against cable provider Charter Spectrum by International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 3, has stepped up to provide the beleaguered union with public and behind-the-scenes support.

The group is replenishing Local 3's strike fund, participating in picket lines and lobbying elected officials as well as Charter Spectrum's corporate leadership, all with the goal of getting the union's 1,800 members back to work with a fair contract. The cable company is the owner of NY-1, the city's dominant local cable-news provider.

Local 3 and the contributing unions declined to disclose the amount of the cash infusion for tactical reasons.

## **UFA Threatens Boycott**

Uniformed Firefighters Association President Gerard Fitzgerald warned the cable giant that if the company failed to sign a fair deal with its striking workers, the UFA would appeal to its 8,500 members "to seek alternatives to your services for their cable and internet services."

The admonition came in a letter written last month by Mr. Fitzgerald to Thomas Rutledge, Charter's Chairman and CEO. "At a time when living expenses throughout the city have risen exponentially and unions have been continually targeted unfairly by employers, your company has continued to enjoy success and profits including an over-30-percent increase in the value of Charter's stock in the last 12 months," Mr. Fitzgerald wrote. "Given that the success of Charter cannot be independent of its employees, we urge you to do the right thing by the members of Local 3 and provide them with a fair contract."

Uniformed Fire Officers Association President Jake Lemonda said his union was also coordinating with the CLC to up the amperage on the Local 3 campaign. “I never had to walk a picket line,” said Mr. Lemonda, whose union by law can’t strike. “But can you imagine going five months without a paycheck? We are very active on social media and part of the AFL-CIO. We are ready to assist them in any way we can.”

### **Management’s Position**

A spokesman for the company told the Daily News when the strike first started that the cable provider wanted to offer higher compensation to the workers than what the union was pushing for, rather than shoring up the “failing” union-managed benefits program. “Spectrum’s primary objective is to provide great service to our customers and we believe fairly-compensated field technicians are critical to that objective,” company spokesman John Bonomo told the paper.

Public-union labor leaders say the stakes are high. They maintain that how the strike plays out will have national ramifications, because it involves the nation’s fastest-growing cable company, with a presence already in 41 states. Their concern is that if Charter Spectrum can break Local 3, in what has been traditionally one of the nation’s most pro-labor cities, labor’s hand will be diminished around the nation as it faces a growing anti-union, right-to-work movement. Today 28 states, including once-union-friendly bastions like Michigan, have enacted some form of right-to-work legislation.

### **‘Have to Be Unified’**

“There can be no distinction between the public- and private-union sectors, because this has to be one unified labor movement,” said John Samuelsen, president of both Transport Workers Union Local 100 and the union’s International. “I am in contact with the Central Labor Council about supporting Local 3 and there is always room for us to do more, and there will be more to come.”

Mr. Samuelsen said his union was able to play a major role in last year’s successful Communications Workers of America-Verizon strike in large part because of the close proximity between Local 100’s office and Verizon’s main picket line at its Brooklyn headquarters. “The

officers, rank and file, everybody was down there because the logistics were so great,” he recalled.

The AFL-CIO New York City Central Labor Council, which represents 1.3 million workers in 300 unions, confirmed it is the central point of contact for the mutual aid being directed to Local 3. “We are continuing to educate union members and elected officials on the outrageous position Charter/Spectrum has taken in attacking the traditional pension and benefit funds paid for by these dedicated workers,” CLC President Vinnie Alvarez said in an email.

The additional financial and moral support is coming at a critical time, according to Local 3 leadership. “The members are holding up, but morale is low and we are working a lot of channels to resolve this,” said Derek Jordan, Local 3’s business representative. “People are losing their houses. People are being taken to court over their co-op payments and people are finding temporary jobs.”

### **Members Squeezed**

He continued, “But we are getting support from all the unions. The Central Labor Council, the firefighters, and the police unions.” Mr. Jordan said other unions have been helping Local 3 fill out its picket lines, as its members have had to find other work to make ends meet as the strike drags on.

Last week a delegation from the Workmen’s Circle, a Jewish social-justice non-profit with deep ties to the city’s labor movement, brought 40 people to support Local 3 at a Manhattan picket-line site. “We were there to give the workers a boost to their spirits,” said Ann Toback, the non-profit’s executive director. “It is disheartening to see a union out for five months like this, but now we are building a broader outside coalition.”

She said her group’s organizational ties ran particularly deep with both the American Federation of Teachers and the United Federation of Teachers. “We have to keep this outreach going, because all too often what we see is that non-union workers are totally unaware that the

protections and rights they enjoy today were secured for them by the union movement, and these fights are still very real and present today.”

Labor historian Jane Latour said the length of the Local 3 strike was troubling. “We are talking about IBEW Local 3, historically a powerhouse of the skilled trades,” she said. “It is a mystery as to why we have not yet seen the kind of push-back and fight-back you need to support these workers. I have been out interviewing rank-and-file union members from both public and private sectors and I only found two who knew about Local 3’s strike.”

### **Not Getting Message Out**

Some veteran organizers with other unions said that Local 3 had not yet broken through with its story to the vast majority of New Yorkers, who surveys show still support the broader union movement. They cited as a template recent successful multi-media campaigns by TWU Local 100 and the CWA that relied on a mix of social media, print and broadcast ads to take their case to consumers.

“How about having all the elected officials up in Albany and here in the city say they were not going to go on NY1 news programs until the company settled with the workers?” asked one organizer not cleared by union leadership to talk to the press on such a sensitive matter as another union’s strike strategy.

George Arzt, a former press secretary to Mayor Ed Koch and a political strategist whose client list includes both public- and private-sector unions, disagreed with that “in-your-face” strategy. “But if you don’t get your story out, no one else will, so unions have to do marketing on many levels,” he said. “You need a focal point like a big rally at City Hall that brings together the broader labor movement.”

“It comes down to street theater and the communication-campaign strategy you are rolling out behind the scenes,” said Tom Butler, whose public-relations clients include public and private unions. “You got to think retired members as well. We were involved in the CWA strike through

a third party we represented called the Bell Tel Retirees Association, which meant we could engage 135,000 members across the country to clue them in on what was at stake for them.”