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Revenge: Spectrum Workers on Strike Build Their Own ISP

Whitney Kimball

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If, for any number of reasons, you'd like to burn telecoms to the ground and build a new internet service provider on their smoldering remains, good news for you. New York City Spectrum workers, who've weathered an anguishing four-year strike, have built their own internet service provider. If the city throws its support behind it, People's Choice Communications could liberate New Yorkers from cable gangsters once and for all.

The city itself is almost constantly fighting Spectrum. With its rise to dominance in New York, Gov. Andrew Cuomo has tried to evict it; attorneys general had to chase it around for allegedly defrauding 2.2 million New York customers; and the company was accused of putting employees in harm's way just one month into the pandemic. Unionized Spectrum workers just hit the four-year anniversary of their strike, during which time Spectrum's parent company Charter made its CEO the third-highest-compensated executive in America.

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The Spectrum workers behind the co-op, members of IBEW Local 3, have been on strike practically since Charter showed up in 2016 and bought Time Warner. Workers have said that the company showed no interest in good faith bargaining over the contract it inherited, attempting to jettison pensions and health insurance. “Their goal was to try to eliminate the union, and we could see that from the first time they came to the bargaining table,” survey technician, striker, and IBEW Local 3 steward Troy Walcott told Gizmodo. “They presented us with an offer that was impossible for us to accept.”

Walcott told Gizmodo that, while some have been forced to go back to Spectrum, about 1,200 of the 1,800 strikers are still holding the line and making ends meet with odd jobs. Walcott said that people are still losing homes, and the strain has broken up families, while media attention has dissipated. “Everybody kind of looks past it,” he said. “We’re kind of a ghost in the city.”

After attempting to convince the city to establish a municipal network, organizers turned to the idea of a cooperatively owned model, the kind of radical concept recently in the realm of activist dreams. Workers co-own the company; the building residents own the network; the C-Suite doesn’t extract a cent. Residents pay for the installation fee in monthly increments, which organizers believe might range from \$300-\$400 per apartment. But residents cover the cost similar to a mortgage, in monthly payments of around \$10-\$20, which also covers service.

By comparison, Spectrum’s lowest-priced offering is \$50, with packages going up to \$150—which represents over a quarter of a public housing resident’s monthly rent. People’s Choice operates light, scalable infrastructure. The fixed wireless network is enabled by a “mesh network”: antennas are installed on individual buildings, which receive a wireless signal from the co-op’s central hub. Building resi-

Customers who can afford to pay Spectrum's exorbitant rates have been sort of stuck with the company. As *In These Times* reported back in February 2020, the city ominously hinted that it would renew Spectrum's franchise agreement, which is protected by federal law. The state only gets an out in "especially egregious cases."

People's Choice prioritizes the Bronx, a borough specifically left with an utter dearth of Spectrum service. As of November 2020, the New York City comptroller's office estimated that 100,000 students were still entirely without internet service. Just a few months into the outbreak of the pandemic, the company petitioned the FCC to impose data caps, artificial limits on internet usage in order to charge more. Thousands of published Better Business Bureau complaints in the New York metropolitan area report service outages, surprise bills for unused service, and massive price hikes.

"Big telecoms are more interested in making fifty to a hundred dollars a month serving people on the Upper East Side than they are in the Bronx," Forman told Gizmodo. "It would be an utter outrage if the city gave a single cent of taxpayer dollars to Spectrum after what's done in the past four years."

dents then connect routers via ethernet cables and operate as normal.

Sascha Meinrath, a mesh network pioneer who helped architect People's Choice, compared the system to a spider web. In the event of a link break, building antennas can connect and reroute through each other, reducing the likelihood of large-scale outages.

The co-op makes a radical proposal in the business structure itself. Parsing out the network to customers and the ISP company to workers implies that both groups get an equal share of bargaining power. Customers who own the infrastructure will be promised the option to bring in a new service provider; the reverse is true for workers, who can pull their services. "It means people will have to collaborate, and I think that's really interesting," Meinrath told Gizmodo. "It means that you're going to pay fair wages," he said. "It means that customer service is going to be really important."

"This is not a charity," Meinrath added. "This is a sustainable social enterprise."

It also means that speeds get faster and service gets cheaper as more customers sign-on. "Once you get critical mass of people, you will be able to buy more bandwidth in bulk, which drops the cost per megabit dramatically," Meinrath said. "By dramatically, I mean, it can drop by multiple orders of magnitude. The difference between one and two gigs is very different than the difference between ten and one hundred gigs. It's remarkable how cheap bandwidth gets when you buy it in bulk."

They still haven't worked out all the costs, but they'll certainly offer a better return on any co-owners' investment. We rarely get a hard metric to define how much telecoms are charging through the nose, but a 2015 investigation found that Comcast was pocketing 97 percent profit margins. Co-ownership necessitates transparency. The money left over from anticipated minimal monthly payments is meant to fund community services and payback co-owners in dividends.

“Having ownership of something as big as a cable system is definitely going to be a game-changer in the community that we’re serving,” Troy Walcott said.

While a relatively small number of people are currently using the system, People’s Choice claims that it already has the potential to reach hundreds of thousands of Bronx residents.

“We have a big portion of most of the Bronx covered with our antenna,” Walcott said. “Now we have to go building by building to let people know we’re out there and start turning them on.” (You can reach out and ask for service here.) A few dozen Spectrum strikers have been actively involved in the installations, but Walcott expects that at least one hundred workers are waiting in the wings for the project to scale up.

Walcott says that they’re equipped to hit a minimum speed of 25 megabits per second (Mbps) download and 3 Mbps upload, the requirement to legally qualify as a broadband connection.

Spectrum’s “low-income internet” offering is 30 megabits per second, though the company qualifies this with the disclaimer that “wireless speeds may vary.” (Spectrum is not known for transparency, and in 2018, it settled for \$174.2 million with the state for alleged lies.) Co-op organizers say that speeds for the customers online are now much higher than Spectrum’s minimum average due to the low customer base, but they hope that as they scale up People’s Choice can reach a minimum download speed of 50 megabits per second.

“Up until this past year, this idea of creating mesh networks, or fixed wireless networks, was basically something that only like anarchist nerds did, speaking as an anarchist nerd myself,” Erik Forman told Gizmodo. Forman is a research fellow at the Institute for the Cooperative Digital Economy, a research center that envisions worker-owned alternatives to major tech platforms (one example of that effort is a worker-owned alternative to Uber). He describes himself as a “co-op developer.” Forman says People’s Choice was mostly built by sweat equity, with grants from partners Metro IAF, a nonprofit afford-

able housing developer, and BlocPower, a renewable energy startup. Brooklyn Law School’s tech clinic, BLIP, chipped in with administrative support, Forman said.

Forman says he’s been mulling over the idea of worker-owned co-ops since he attempted a unionization effort at Starbucks years ago. “A lot of people I’ve met in the restaurant industry would say their dream was to own their own restaurant someday,” he said. “So I started thinking, well, what if we direct our energies not just to unionizing the employers, but to helping workers become owners of the places they work?”

The city now has to decide whether to take Spectrum strikers up on that bid. New York City is now soliciting proposals for affordable wireless networks for underserved areas like NYCHA housing. At the time of publishing, Gizmodo was unable to immediately reach a city administrator for comment on whether it plans to consider their proposal.

Even a relatively small initial investment could propel the network into self-sustaining momentum. “With significant funding upfront, we can go after a thousand people from day one,” Meinrath said. The alternative is recruiting batches of 100 customers who have to bear higher up-front expenses for things like individual pieces of equipment that could be bulk ordered at a much lower cost.

In other words, it seems that without some help, the future is uncertain. Good service isn’t fully guaranteed yet (not that it is anywhere, now). They might have some issues with scaling, and it’s unclear if the nascent cooperative will be able to sustain employees full-time. But the fact that you’re paying down the installation with a cheap monthly bill offers little risk to people who want to try it.

And at this point, the city has scant excuse to reject a bold worker-led and coalition-backed alternative. “I know that the city is thinking outside the box on a lot of business models behind this,” Meinrath said. “The open question is whether they are then putting their money where their mouth is.”