

Tele Con Ed Destroys Jobs

By Myles Calvey

Democrats have been listening to politicians talk about “working families” and “jobs, jobs, jobs” for decades – it’s part of nearly every campaign speech I’ve ever heard.

And believe me, I’ve heard my share going back to meeting Tip O’Neill in North Cambridge over 50 years ago. Since then I’ve worked as a telephone lineman, union organizer and elected labor leader with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

While Democrats are accustomed to hearing candidates talk about a good job being the best social program, incumbent U.S. Sen Ed Markey is asking Massachusetts for their support in next week’s primary in spite of the fact that his record features the counter-Democratic message of job destruction rather than job creation and low wages rather than good pay.

Back in the early 1990s, in the wake of the break-up of the Bell System, those of us in the industry predicted that consolidation rather than competition would come to the brave new world of telecom, especially as virulently anti-union wireless carriers came into the picture.

As head of the House subcommittee overseeing regulation of telecommunications, Ed Markey was in a good position to make sure the telecom revolution would equitably benefit workers, owners and consumers alike.

One of the first worrying signs was Markey’s refusal to meet with members of my union, the IBEW Local 2222. As big money moved into the wireless world, we fought pitched battles against phalanxes of corporate lawyers and lobbyists intent on decertifying union shops and hollowing out landline employment as well.

Word of Markey’s telecom bill spread fast but we couldn’t get a hearing with the local congressman more responsible than anyone else for the future contours of the

regulatory landscape. I had to stalk and then try to buttonhole the congressman at a local parade just to get a few words in about the potential harm an ill-conceived bill could do to job security and benefits for thousands.

Tele Con Ed spotted me before I got a word in and hurried on. And then, as he hoped, the parade moved on, passing me by – and along with it, the hopes for a bill that would serve as a bulwark against heedless profiteering and job destruction.

Markey spread the fiction that his telecom bill would result in companies lining up to compete with lower and lower prices for more and more services. That was crazy talk out of Never-Never Land and Shangri-la – the uniformed rantings of a politician accepting a wall of money from telecom executives.

After passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the reality was the shuttering of phone offices and the scything of some 8,000 good-paying, union jobs in Boston alone as Big Telecom consolidated. Nationally, hundreds of thousands of jobs went on the chopping block. “Malden” Ed Markey didn’t even bother trying to save the 7 Elm Street telecom facility in his hometown.

Sure, some jobs were created by the need to string new wires and erect new towers but they were mostly lower-wage, no-benefits employment, with nothing at the end of the line but a severance check and a handshake – if you were lucky.

By the late 90s, as deregulation mania took hold and Wall Street influence grew over Congress, the plight of blue and white-collar telecom workers failed to attract much notice in an environment where sparkling new apps and dotcom unicorns captured the fancy of the media. We were dinosaurs – dismissed, derided and discounted.

Meanwhile, what happened to those brightly packaged promises of connectivity for all? Currently, only 28% of the nation has access to high-speed internet. In Ed Markey’s own state, about 18 towns don’t have any access to broadband.

A bill that was supposed to save consumers half a trillion dollars, add 1.5 million jobs and boost the economy by \$2 trillion has proved about as empty as a Markey promise. Instead cable rates have surged by 50%, local phone rates have shot up by 20%, telecom companies' market value has shrunk by \$2 trillion and the industry has shed half a million jobs.

In contrast to Ed Markey's deaf ear, his opponent, Congressman Joe Kennedy III, has walked the picket lines with us, met with our workers, listened to our stories, and acted on our behalf in opposition to the \$400 million in lobbying expenses and political contributions Big Telecom has made in Washington since 1998.

The choice for me September 1 is easy. I'm with Joe. "Working families" and "jobs, jobs, jobs" isn't his slogan. It's his mission – and his legacy, building on the work of his father, grandfather and great-uncles in watching out for those on the outside of power.

I remember Speaker O'Neill saying that "all politics is local." That's certainly true, and I've never forgotten to pay attention to politics on the ground. But it's also true that "all politics is personal." To me, this race is personal. Ed Markey has done nothing for us in the trenches of the telecom work force, while Joe is our champion. It doesn't get more personal than that.

Myles Calvey is Business Manager of Local 2222, IBEW.