

In a recurring pattern for Hawaii legacy companies, Hawaiian Telcom is facing what company officials are politely calling a merger. This is in fact a takeover. While in the end, it may be good for the company and our state, we are again thrust into a wait and see position regarding impact to the public and impact to Hawaiian Telcom's workers.

Hawaii's recent well-publicized merger/takeover attempt of Hawaiian Electric by NextEra did not turn out so well; the long process was extraordinarily controversial and ultimately rejected by our Public Utilities Commission (PUC). The transition of another giant, Oceanic Time Warner Cable to Spectrum seems to be going more smoothly. You have to go back more than a decade to recall the last time Hawaiian Telcom faced a takeover. It was at the hands of investment firm the Carlyle Group, and for those who remember, the result left consumers with multitudes of service complaints and workers with a raw deal, including reduced pensions.

As we will soon enter the regulatory process of review by the PUC, the Hawaii State AFL-CIO affiliates, representing over 100,000 unionized workers in our state, will be closely monitoring this situation. To start, we expect that the outgoing Hawaiian Telcom management will treat their workers — the very folks whose dedication to better service and economic sacrifices saved the company — with fairness and respect as they are transitioned to new ownership. The last thing we want to see is the selling out of these employees to new mainland owners. The prospective owners, Cincinnati Bell, are a unionized organization, and we hope they plan to honor the long history of collective bargaining here in Hawaii and treat their new workers with dignity.

The Hawaii State AFL-CIO is also focused on what this means for consumers. We sincerely hope and expect that the PUC will be diligent in its responsibility to fully vet this new company. It would be a welcome relief if this can be achieved without the ridiculous drama of the NextEra process, the impact of which spilled over to our State Senate with the rejection of Governor Ige's PUC appointee. Mud flew in all directions, and many observers were left wondering if the ultimate mission of protecting consumer interests was not lost in the shuffle. We can only hope the Ige Administration will not fumble the process this time. Hawaii cannot afford to see a repeat of poor service and even weaker customer relations that resulted from the Carlyle Group takeover; in fact, some would argue we are only now getting back to a pre-merger place at Hawaiian Telcom thanks to its current leadership and employees. Let's hope that our PUC Commissioners can conduct their review diligently and efficiently and determine the best path forward for our local telephone provider.

Again, this may prove to be good for Hawaii. However, we owe it to ourselves as consumers to pay attention and speak out if the process goes awry or if workers are being scarified to show a stronger bottom line. As advocates for our affiliate members, we certainly expect that employees will not get a raw deal out of this merger. The current leaders and staff of Hawaiian Telcom have worked long and hard to restore success and trust in their company. Let's all make sure this merger is the best idea, and be prepared to speak out if it proves otherwise.

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