

Worker's Rights and the Economic Crisis: Victory to the UEW Plant Takeover in Chicago!

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On December 5, in Chicago, the owners of Republic Windows and Doors were set to close their doors after declaring financial ruin and abruptly laid off its 260 mostly Latino workers. Rather than passively accepting this kick in the teeth, the United Electrical Workers Union (UE) members decided to fight back, using a tactic not seen in this country since the 1930's. They occupied the factory and have continued to do so in shifts since Friday.

This struggle is of exceptional importance because of its boldness in responding to the economic crisis and how it is affecting working people. This boldness could set an example for future confrontations and therefore deserves the attention and support of all workers.

The chain of events leading to this crisis started when Republic Window's creditor, Bank of America, refused to extend credit to the company. According to Crain's Chicago Business, Republic Window's sales had fallen from \$4 million to \$2.9 million in the last month. However, Bank of America is flush with \$25 billion from the bi-partisan bail out. At a solidarity demonstration outside the plant on Saturday, protesters expressed the situation concisely with stickers and signs reading, "You got bailed out, we got sold out."

Workers are demanding \$1.5 million in severance and vacation pay owed them by management. Federal law mandates that workers get paid for unused vacation time and are either given 60 days notice of a mass layoff or pay for that time. The UE workers were only given three days notice of the closing. Republic Window and Door's officials are claiming that Bank of America is not allowing them to make these required payments and benefit adjustments. Bank of America has responded by stating that they have no "...right to control whether a company complies with applicable laws or honors its commitment to its employees." While this bickering between thieves continues, the workers' intolerable situation and justified anger remains. "We aren't animals," Apolinar Cabrera, a 17-year Republic Windows employee, told Chicago Town Daily News. "We're human beings and deserve to be treated like human beings."

Workers have also expressed their suspicion that Republic Windows and Doors intends to move out of state and restructure their finances, leaving debt and misery in the wake. Some have reported that as early as two weeks ago the company started moving equipment out of the plant.

In this economic crisis, given what the capitalists are trying to get away with by making working people pay for the recession, the stakes are high. A 14-year machine operator at the company, Ron Bender, observed, "We're doing this for the other working people in the country. What's happened to us can happen to anyone — they could just close up and put

you out and give you no severance pay.”

The AFL-CIO and Change to Win, as well as all other organizations concerned with the rights of working people should line up in solidarity with these UE members by educating and mobilizing their ranks in support. A victory could embolden workers across the country to resist the results of Wall Street’s greed and the bailout, which will be all the more needed as times grow harder. It could serve as a stepping stone for greater victories in the future where workers will not simply demand vacation and severance pay from a bankrupt company, but demand that such a company be nationalized under workers’ control. Furthermore, such a working class movement could go beyond addressing the problems at a given company and win victories for all workers in the areas of health care, ending the current wars, ensuring adequate funding for education, creating jobs for all, and so on.

The news has been brutal and frightening for workers over the last few months. A worldwide recession of unknown depth and duration is unfolding. In this country, the number of home foreclosures is expected to hit seven million by the end of the year. Last month alone 533,000 workers lost their jobs, contributing to the highest unemployment rate in 15 years. And while this decline accelerates, workers have been stung with a Democratic Party-led bipartisan bailout of the financial institutions whose reckless greed is responsible for this mess. The New York Times estimates that this rescue package for the wealthy will cost seven trillion American taxpayer dollars (see “The Bail Out Intensifies” on this site). While this arrangement helps to ease the capitalists’ anxiety, they place a dark cloud over working people’s future. Rather than promoting economic growth, the bailout measures are more likely to result in hoarding on the part of the bailout’s beneficiaries as well as produce inflation. Meanwhile, unemployment will continue to climb, and there will be further slicing of our already cut-to-the-bone social safety net by the capitalists’ politicians.

The inevitable consequence of such developments is that people are left with no choice but to fight against the conditions they are forced to endure. They begin to see that there are opposed interests at play between those who control the economy and political system, and those who are expected to do all the sacrificing. Workers will be compelled to act and, as a result, begin to become aware of themselves as a class where, if they are to defend themselves and their rights, must unite against those who are accustomed to ruling them without question. Under such circumstances, the workers’ demands are always modest and partial to begin with, but, to the degree that their actions rely on their independent strength as a class, they plot a course towards growing confrontation with the capitalist status quo and thereby raise the question of who shall control society, working people or the rich minority. Nationwide, such a course initially starts with an accumulation of small skirmishes, unavoidably leading to a social explosion that can place the working class’ interests on the historical stage in a way that would have been seen as impossible just a short time ago. The worker’s occupation of Republic Windows and Doors could prove to be a skirmish that sets the example for a working class upsurge that will bring more change and hope into our lives than any capitalist politician ever could.

There is no telling how long this occupation and the struggle behind it will continue. Workers, Republic Windows and Doors, and Bank of America are supposed to meet at 4:00pm on Monday. Nevertheless, these workers’ actions have already made a mark in labor history. Food has been coming for them from all over in solidarity. You can donate by going to www.ueunion.org and clicking on “anger in Chicago,” or by writing a check payable

to the "UE Local 110 Solidarity Fund" and sending it to UE Local 1110 Solidarity Fund, 37 S. Ashland, Chicago, IL 60607. Messages of support can be sent to organizer Leah Fried <mailto:leahfried@gmail.com>. At the Jobs with Justice Web site, you can send a message of protest to Bank of America. <http://nyc.indymedia.org/en/2008/12/101949.html>. You can also call UE at 312-829-8300.

Even President-elect, Barak Obama, because of massive public support for the UE workers, has felt compelled to offer support to the workers at Republic Windows and Doors in the form of lip service, without promising any specific action.

Organized labor should call on the government to take over Republic Windows and Doors and let the workers run the plant themselves. This demand could be part of a government emergency public works project that would make all public buildings, beginning with public housing, more energy efficient by installing new windows and doors. Such a program could then be the first step in establishing a broad-based coalition that would advocate a public works program that would put people back to work while maintaining their standard of living. This program could instill confidence among working people and their allies and inspire them to proceed onwards to fundamentally change the economic system so that it would serve the needs of people, not the pursuit of profits for the rich.

In these hard times, now more than ever, an injury to one is an injury to all. A victory for UE Local 1110 at Republic Windows is a victory for all workers!

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