

Victory in Chicago: Republic Workers' Occupation

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The following report was written for Against the Current by an anonymous correspondent, with assistance from Jerry Mead-Lucero. You can find Jerry's blog at www.pilsenprole.blogspot.com. Also check out www.laborexpress.org for "Labor Express, Chicago's only labor news and current affairs radio program for working people, by working people," Sundays at 7:00 pm on 88.7 FM in Chicago or live on the web at www.wlux.org.

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"FOR ONCE IN our lives we had the perfect storm. Usually we don't get any support from politicians or any coverage from the mass media...but this time, everything came together," said Tim Curtin, International Representative for United Electrical workers (UE).

The Republic Windows and Doors occupation lasted one week and involved 250 workers in one factory in Chicago. It illuminated the anger against the banks and the bosses of the American people and of the conscious layers of the working class in other countries, notably in France, Venezuela and Argentina.

"The lesson is that people are ready to fight back, but they don't have the organizations. That is why we need those of us who are political, Greens, those of us who are on the left, to join with labor and pressure Congress for the Employee Free Choice Act. If labor had 35+ percent organized, we could have gone a lot farther," Curtin added.

Passage of EFCA, the most important pledge Barack Obama made to labor, would be a major victory for unionism in the United States. There are concerns, however, that EFCA could have some unintended consequences, in particular that it might lead to a "market-share based approach" to organizing. Some critics fear it will encourage the practice of some unions who have reached agreements with employers, without spending the time to build organization from the ground up.

The experience at Republic demonstrates the strengths of a democratic, bottom-up "member run" union as UE describes itself. According to Jorge Mujica, founding member of the March 10th Committee, one of the primary reasons this occupation happened was the member education that UE undertook in the last five years.

What Immigrant Workers Brought

According to Mujica, the experience and inclination of the Mexican-American and African-American workforce also made them receptive to UE organizer's proposals to occupy the factory. "In Mexico,

strikes are plant takeovers. The owners can't move the equipment by law."

Building on their experiences with the 2006 marches for immigrant rights, immigrant workers have a growing sense of their own power. The workers were looking for something a little more effective than a lawsuit or a corporate campaign.

Whether this can be built upon depends on how the economic crisis plays out, how well the corporate parties can address the crisis, and whether they can co-opt workers in motion. In this case, the Illinois Democratic Party and Barack Obama responded handily to the crisis. The quick declarations of support surprised many, helped the workers win their demands and gave the politicians renewed populist appeal. The Chicago City Council and the Governor (one day before his arrest on unrelated federal corruption charges) threatened to divest from Bank of America, a move that forced the bank to negotiate.

After the bank capitulated — pledging the funds for the workers' severance and vacation pay — the union and the workers felt an obligation to praise the bank for its actions. It is highly unlikely, however, that the bank would have settled if not for the militant, direct action tactics of the Republic workers and the pressure brought to bear by the public, the press and the politicians.

Bank of America received \$25 billion in bailout funds from the American people, reluctantly disbursing \$1.35 million, or 0.0007 percent! Furthermore, they will be repaid with interest on this money by Republic's management. Remember and transmit this to your fellow workers the next time you hear Representative Luis Gutierrez praising Bank of America for its exemplary corporate citizenship.

Starting with the Immigrant Rights Marches of 2006 and continuing with the Republic Window's occupation, Chicago has reemerged as the focal point for militant labor, social and political action. Chicago's long populist and working-class history, along with its large and concentrated working-class population have no doubt influenced this development.

President of the Chicago Local of the National Writers Union/UAW, Larry Goldbetter, speaking with representatives of Midwest UAW Locals, expressed the view that the UAW should consider similar militant action as a way of addressing their own crisis. He described the UAW representatives as being receptive, but felt the current economic crisis has created a lot of fear.

Mark Haasis, Region 4 UAW representative, said at solidarity rally outside Bank of America's Chicago offices, "...our union was founded through a sit-down strike at General Motors in Flint 72 years ago. The brothers and sisters of Republic Windows UE Local 1110 are an example to this whole country. We hope more and more workers take things into their own hands. We gotta do that, we gotta fight back."

P.S.

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