

# Domino Sugar workers in New York on strike for more than eight months

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Approximately 300 workers, members of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), have been on strike against the Domino Sugar Company in New York City for more than eight months. The length of the walkout is explained by the company's unwillingness to bend on their proposed concession demands for a new contract.

Management wants to cut the jobs of over 100 workers without regard to seniority, eliminate the guaranteed 40-hour week, contract out work for maintenance and repair, eliminate some personal and sick days off, and reduce the company's contribution to the health and welfare funds. The changes being demanded by the company are so drastic that one worker on the picket line stated, "The company gave us an offer they knew we couldn't accept. They wanted this strike."

The Domino plant in Brooklyn has been in existence since 1858. The parent company, Amstar, sold the facility to Tate and Lyle of London in 1988. This international company, one of the world's giants in the production of sweeteners, claims that it needs to streamline its production process due to falling profits in the industry. In 1998 they recorded \$121.4 million in net profits from their worldwide operations. It has been experimenting with shipping semi-processed sugar in liquid form from a Baltimore plant to the Brooklyn facility instead of processing the unrefined sugar in Brooklyn. As a result, the jobs of 10 longshoremen who used to unload and tie up the unrefined sugar have already been eliminated.

Workers on the picket line explained that the company no longer wanted a full-time workforce at the Brooklyn plant. Since the liquid sugar can be easily contaminated in bad weather, shipments from Baltimore might be delayed for a number of days.

Therefore the company wants the contractual right not to pay workers until a shipment arrives, when their labor is needed. A spokesman from International Longshoremen's Association Local 1814, which represents the workers on strike, said that the union is willing to accept layoffs, but insists that it must be done according to seniority.

Management is threatening the jobs and living standards of workers, who in many cases have been working at the plant for 30 years or more. John Mihalovic, with 16 years experience, said, "They want to make us part-time workers, or shift workers." Other workers said that the Baltimore plant, organized by a different union, went on strike recently for only three days before the company settled. They believe that there is no way that management could tolerate a strike at both plants simultaneously so an agreement was quickly achieved with them. In this way the workers are kept divided. There was also a recent settlement with yet another plant located in Louisiana.

Farlo Anderson, with 26 years on the job, said, "Before Tate and Lyle took over, this used to be a very nice place to work in. This company, however, treats us like we are slaves. The work is hard. In the summer time there are places in there that reach 140 degrees. However, your coworkers help you get through the day. We are one big family. Everyone here is very close. We treat each other like brothers and sisters. If someone gets hurt or is sick, everyone helps out.

"We have people working here from every part of the world. People work here who were born in all parts of this country, as well as from Europe, the Caribbean, South America and Russia. If everyone got along as well as we do, the world would be a much better place to live in. When a guy retires, 200 people show up."

These feelings, perhaps, help explain why it is that

not a single worker has crossed the picket line since the strike began. However one striker, 62-year-old John Alschen, killed himself in December. This man was a Russian refugee whose family was used as forced labor by the Nazis. He knew what hardship is, but he didn't know, at his age, what his future employment and income would be. After picketing in the rain for six hours he went home, climbed into a hot bath and cut his wrists.

Workers on the picket line speculated that Mr. Alschen was concerned that the strikers' unemployment benefits—about \$360 a week—were about to run out after six months. They receive no strike pay from the union. The unemployment benefits are now gone, and they now have no income from any source. Some strikers have already been borrowing money on their retirement plans, some have sold their houses, and a number have already declared personal bankruptcy.

Richard Thomas, who has worked in the plant for 32 years, explained that in addition to this pressure management spies on their picket line with cameras, microphones, and security guards posted all over the building. This was confirmed when a photographer took pictures of the picket line, and immediately, company guards, including one person who was stationed on the top of the building, came rushing out to observe a reporting team from the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Mr. Thomas stated, “The company hired these security guards before we went out on strike. Our union was negotiating a new contract eight months before the contract deadline in mid-June. However, the company had their own plans. They knew that we would have to reject their horrendous contract offer and go out on strike. This is what they wanted. They are experimenting in there with their new processing ideas. From what we hear, they will not be completed until late summer. I will be happy if we go back to work in August.”

Mr. Thomas explained the facility is in the midst of retooling and testing equipment necessary for the changes in the production process from unrefined to semi-refined sugar. The workers' idle months have meant that the company has not had to pay their employees while instituting these changeovers.

Mr. Thomas also said, “There has been absolutely no violence in this strike. There has not even been a hint of

it, but if Tate and Lyle feel that something is wrong, they call the cops who come very quickly. It seems that the city has given the company some tax breaks, and now is servicing them with the city police. The media has hardly reported the strike. Most people who live right here in Brooklyn don't even know that we have been out for more than eight months. I don't have a very kind attitude to the politicians. [Democratic Party politician] Charles Schumer came here in 1992, the last time we were out on strike, and said that he would help us. Now that he is a US senator from New York he doesn't even know that we are alive.”

There are a number of workers on and off the picket line who were quite critical of the union. One worker said that he couldn't understand their leadership's attitude when Alschen committed suicide, saying that they didn't realize what he was going through. How could they not know, he asked.

Another worker made the point that since the strike involves the longshoremen's union, it could stop the shipments from Baltimore. Since the tugboat crews are members of the ILA this would be easy for them to do. He also felt that the distribution of the sugar from the Domino plant could be stopped if the truckers, who are also in a union, simply did not pick up and deliver the product.

“It seems like there is a collusion between the union and the company,” he said.



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