Domino Sugar strike in Brooklyn enters eighteenth month

Alan Whyte
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Almost 300 members of International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) Local 1814 went on strike on June 15, 1999 against the Domino sugar refinery in Brooklyn. The strike was provoked by company demands to destroy jobs, seniority rights and the right to a 40-hour week.

For the first nine months of the walkout, the strikers maintained their resolve and not a single worker returned to the facility. However, deepening pressures on the workers was reflected in the tragic death of one striker, John Alschen, 62, who in December 1999 committed suicide after returning home after picket duty.

It was not until the beginning of April this year when, feeling financially strained and seeing no hope, some workers began to individually return to work, accepting the company's terms. There are now only 100 strikers left on the picket line. In mid-November, these workers met to consider the latest company proposal. After rejecting the offer by a vote of 54 to 46, they then unanimously agreed to stay out on strike.

Those workers who voted for the contract did so because they saw no light at the end of the tunnel, not because they thought the offer was a good one. Indeed, the contract offer was only slightly different from the one that provoked the strike.

The Domino plant in Brooklyn has been in existence since 1858. Tate and Lyle, an international company with its headquarters in London, took ownership of the facility in 1988. One of the largest companies in the sweetening business, Tate and Lyle justified their draconian contract demands on the basis of their need to streamline the production process due to falling industry profits. The company also has a reputation of union-busting.

The workers at the Brooklyn plant are a multiethnic group. Some have worked at Domino for more than 30 years and have developed close personal relationships, bonds which may account for the determination on the part of a number of strikers. The Domino workers' strike, however, has been isolated from the rest of the labor movement. Even in Brooklyn, very few workers are aware of the existence of their struggle because the ILA and the rest of the AFL-CIO unions have done virtually nothing to support the strikers.

Their assistance has been token at best. Sixteen members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) have honored the picket line since the strike began and the New York City Central Labor Council raised $130,000 to help the strikers pay for food and rent. Laborers Local 78 has been generous enough to send the strikers an inflatable rat to assist them on their rallies. However, with the union leadership unwilling to muster more than 300 people at the rallies, the presence of a giant rat hasn't seemed to help very much.

The strikers have received virtually no support from the ILA leadership, a union with 47,000 members and $51 million in assets. The strikers complain that they have never seen their ILA international president, John Bowers, on the picket line. President since 1987, Bowers learned the union business from his father who headed the ILA's west side “Pistol Local,” which earned its name because firearms were the tool of choice for resolving disagreements.

Bowers was named in a federal racketeering suit alleging the mob controlled the union, which made money on a ghost employee scheme and planned the murder of a rival. The union settled the lawsuit, agreeing to a government monitor over several locals, including Local 1814 at Domino. No charges were brought against Bowers and he retains his position,

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receiving a $330,000 annual salary plus $55,000 for expenses.

The New York State AFL-CIO unions voted to call for a boycott of Domino Sugar, but even this timid proposal of support was rejected by the national AFL-CIO, which also rejected the idea of creating a national strike fund for the workers. The leadership of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), which has members working for Domino refineries in Maryland and Louisiana, strongly opposed the idea. A spokesman for the UFCW expressed fear that a boycott could hurt his own union.

John Sweeney, AFL-CIO national president, has remained consisting silent on the Domino workers' struggle. Is this an example of what he means when he claims that his leadership is dedicated to revitalizing the strength, unity and militancy of the unions? Lacking any support, the Domino strikers are facing the prospect of another cold winter on the picket line.

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