

Domino Sugar strike in Brooklyn ends in defeat

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After 20 months on the picket line, the remaining strikers against Domino Sugar have finally agreed to return to work on the company's terms. Almost three hundred members of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) Local 1814 went on strike June 15, 1999 at the plant located in Brooklyn, New York. The walkout was provoked by the company's demands to destroy jobs, seniority rights and the right to a 40-hour week.

The strike had remained solid without a single worker crossing the picket line until the beginning of April 2000. Feeling financial strains, and demoralized by the lack of support by the trade union officials, workers began to return to work at the refinery. The company had claimed for some time that its production was operating at normal capacity. With almost 130 strikers remaining, workers finally agreed at a union meeting to accept management's contract offer by a vote of 56 to 48. Only four months ago strikers had unanimously rejected what was essentially the same offer.

The new contract will enable the company to eliminate 110 jobs at the Brooklyn plant and introduce other changes to increase productivity. A spokesman for the company has refused to comment on whether the job cuts will take place in accordance with employees' seniority. One local union official has acknowledged that the contract has "wiped out all the protections that people fought for for 50, 60 years."

Tate & Lyle of London, an international company and one of the world's largest producers of sweeteners, purchased the Domino plant in 1988. It has justified its draconian contractual demands on the grounds that it needs to streamline the production process due to falling profits in the industry.

In a press release hailing the three-year settlement, the company said it "provides substantial improvement

in wages and benefits for union employees, and it also contains the operating flexibility which the company sought to improve its competitiveness in the volatile U.S. cane sugar market." Company officials have stated that it is now time for the union and management to work more closely together.

Domino workers, on the other hand, are extremely bitter about the contract. Those who voted for the agreement felt they had no choice but to accept it, as their union leadership had not provided them with any hope of victory. Workers are very critical of both the ILA leadership, the local leadership, and John Sweeney, president of the national AFL-CIO, who left them isolated throughout the strike and provided insufficient funds to carry on the struggle. Most workers in New York City are still not even aware that a strike was taking place at the refinery.

Typical of the comments made by the strikers was, "We got shafted. We got stabbed in the back." Another worker said, "What we really needed was the clout of the labor movement behind us. The same thing that happened to us will happen to every union worker in this city. It's not going to stop with us." Another striker explained that they still don't even know what is in the contract, and must now wait to get the details.

The local union leadership, while acknowledging that the strike was defeated, has attempted to deflect criticism of their role. A spokesman for the parent ILA claimed the union gave the strikers generous support. They said they were so determined to win the struggle that they gave union officials traveling expenses so they could go to England to protest at a Tate & Lyle board meeting.

No more enlightening were the remarks made by Denis Hughes, president of the New York State AFL-CIO. He said, "It bothered me from the beginning that

the union wasn't strong enough to put this together.”
AFL-CIO President John Sweeney has thus far chosen
not to make any public statement on the end of the
strike.



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