

Stella D'oro strikers rally in the Bronx, New York

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Having already braved more than nine weeks of a strike, 200 Stella D'Oro workers and their supporters rallied on Saturday, October 18, outside their cookie-making plant on Broadway in the northern New York City borough of the Bronx. Their contract expired on June 29, 2008, and they have been on strike since the owners walked out of the negotiations on August 13. The workers are members of the Tobacco Workers, and Grain Millers International Union (BCGTM) Local 50.



Stella D'Oro strikers, Lapi Alvarado (center with red jacket)

Stella D'Oro was acquired in 2006 by Brynwood Partners, a private equity firm that specializes in buying up lower middle market companies with enterprise values between \$15 and \$125 million. Their investment strategy is to squeeze companies for higher rates of profit and then sell them off. The cofounder and now senior partner of Brynwood Partners is Hendrik Hartong Jr., who resigned from the notorious unionbusting Pittston coal company in January 1984 to found Brynwood Partners. Hendrik Hartong, III, is now a managing director of the firm.

Brynwood is demanding that Stella D'Oro workers take a \$1.00-an-hour pay cut each year of a five-year

contract. The venture capital firm is demanding workers give up all 12 of their sick days, a week of vacation, four paid holidays and overtime. It is also attempting to make workers pay healthcare premiums.



Eddie Marrero

Eddie Marrero, who has worked at Stella D'Oro for 29 years, explained to the WSWS, "I started working at Stella D'Oro when I was 18 years old. I have worked my way up. I am now a foreman baker and a strike captain. This is one of the best jobs in the Bronx. I put my kid through college with this job. But they are trying to destroy it. Their contract offer is to cut our wages from \$18 to \$13 an hour. They want to take all of our sick days away. They want to eliminate our premium pay for Saturdays.

"I have heard that Brynwood has six plants in Pennsylvania where they work people up to 60 hours a week for minimum wage and no benefits. Brynwood wants to get rich on us, then cut our wages, sell us and make more profits."

Sarah Rodriguez is a single mother with an 11- and a 15-year-old. She works the graveyard shift from 10 p.m. at night until 8:30 a.m. in the morning. She said, "We paid nothing on our health plan, but this company raised our payments to 20 percent. They want to cut salary, vacation, sick days, and our health plan. Our health insurance expired September 30, and to buy the insurance ourselves under COBRA [Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act] is \$449 a month, \$1,065 for a family. I can't afford that. But the new

owners have been making money here since they started. They spent on new products and packaging, but they want to take a million and a half dollars from us. How can they do this to us, especially in the Bronx where people are trying to make a better place?"

The company has pursued ruthless union-busting tactics. Eddie Marrero described how Brynwood forced the strike, brought in scabs and induced unemployed workers to cross picket lines. "They switched the contract language around three times, but it was the same thing. It was like they were making fun of our union. The union officials offered to give up four sick days and two holidays, and Brynwood just walked out of the negotiations.

"This was union-busting from the beginning. The company people walked out on August 13, and we put up our picket lines. We have 140 workers here, and there have been no negotiations since August 13. Three days later, they began bringing scabs into the plant. They had 15 scabs the first day. Three weeks later, they held a Job Fair inside the plant, so everyone who wanted a job had to cross our picket line. Then they went up to 30 or 35 scabs."

The morale of workers at the rally was high, with energetic chants of "No contract, no cookies!" "Nobody from the community crossed our picket line," Eddie pointed out. "I have lived here all my life and I know. People did come from Yonkers and Manhattan. It looks like Rikers Island [jail] in there now. The product and volume are down. They can't have scabs off the street produce the product of skilled bakers."



Sarah Rodriguez

Lapi Alvarado, who has worked at Stella D'Oro for 31 years packing and as a floor supervisor, agreed. "People come by bringing us food. Inside, one office lady quit last week. She knows office work, but they put everybody on machines."

Marrero said the workers face growing harassment. "The scabs have been taunting us. Now we are starting to get harassed by the NYPD. We are striking like professionals. We are picketing in six-hour shifts 24

hours a day and seven days a week. We are not crawling back to them as they thought. But the police are taking away our chairs and parking. There was an arrest of a picketer two days ago. One guy bumped into a car, and they said he damaged it. The car was damaged to start with. This was on Monday. They have this on videotape. They are videotaping everything from those cameras up there.

"We have gotten unemployment benefits since the scabs started coming in. We get strike pay of \$105 a week from the union. Our strike fund is getting low, and with it getting cold we may need a trailer since we are picketing 24/7. The community continues to give us great support. And what the private equity firm is doing is unacceptable in this country."

The last strike at Stella D'Oro was in 1990, although Stella D'Oro was closed in 2003 by a regional Teamsters strike against the layoff of Nabisco drivers after merger with Kraft. Nothing has been done by the New York City trade union officialdom to support Stella D'Oro workers, outside of calls to boycott Stella D'Oro products. Only a dozen or so supporters from a couple of unions, the Professional Staff Congress of City University teachers and the Postal Mail handlers, were at the rally.

The union used the rally as a platform for several lower-level Democratic Party officials, who offered no concrete support. Borough President Adolfo Carrion, for example, proposed to sponsor a bus for the union to protest in front of Brynwood Partners headquarters in Greenwich, Connecticut.



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