

Chicago workers occupy plant set to close

Clement Daly, Kristina Betinis, Alexander Fangmann
8 December 2008

In a sign of the mounting social tensions building up in the United States, about 200 recently laid-off workers at Republic Windows and Doors, a Chicago window manufacturer, have occupied their factory.

Workers have not only lost their jobs, but have lost their benefits as well, including health care for themselves and their families. Their main demand is that the company pay them for unused vacation time, along with 60 days severance pay, as required under federal law.

Workers were informed last Tuesday that Friday, December 5, would be the last day of production. The company claimed that operations had to end immediately because Bank of America had withdrawn its line of credit.

Although Republic has placed the blame for the closing solely on Bank of America's decision to stop loaning the company money, management had known about the closure for at least a few weeks. Workers became suspicious as materials listed in the inventory were nowhere to be found. Others told of the company moving equipment and supplies out of the factory in the middle of the night with the lights off.

With the slump in the housing market, Republic saw its monthly sales fall from \$4 million to \$2.9 million over the last month alone. CEO Rich Gillman, in a letter to the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE) Local 1110, notifying the union of the plant closure, stated, "Our continuing to stay in business will only result in losing more money."

For their part, Bank of America, in a statement

released to the local CBS new station, said, "Neither Bank of America nor any other third-party lender to the company has the right to control whether the company complies with applicable laws or honors its commitments to its employees." Bank of America has been the beneficiary of at least \$25 billion in government bailout money over the past several months, supposedly to free up the credit markets.

The workers' action in carrying out the occupation of the factory is an expression of anger at the callous treatment shown by Republic. Workers invited a *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team inside the plant to discuss their struggle.

Lalo Muñoz told the WSWs, "I've been working over here for 24 years ... and one day they decide to close the doors down and say 'nada,' bye bye, this is it."

Muñoz continued, "Most of the employees have a lot of years working for the company. So the company, they just threw us on the streets, and I don't see any good reason."

The workers also expressed a determination to continue the occupation until their demands were met. One worker, Dagoberto, indicated they were willing to wait "as long as it takes."

Under these conditions, the workers at Republic are striving to find some way to defend their interests, their jobs, and their families. Democratic politicians, on the other hand, working closely with the UE trade union, Republic Windows and Doors, and Bank of America, are seeking to contain the outburst of anger and quickly smother it.

US Representative Luis Gutierrez, a Chicago

Democrat, has moved in to contain the struggle. He made a statement on Saturday, declaring, “All the company had to do was 60 days ago call the workers together and have an orderly, right, transparent closing of the plant... Had they done that, we would not be here right now.”

The company, the bank and the union have agreed to meet on Monday. Carl Rosen, a union leader, said “there is a will on all sides to try to work something out.”

On Sunday, the workers were also visited by the Jesse Jackson, who has a long history of diverting workers’ struggles into the dead end of Democratic Party politics. Jackson is reportedly attempting to pressure Bank of America to reinstate Republic’s line of credit for a sufficient period of time to allow some settlement to be reached.

Even if an agreement is worked out between the Democrats, the companies, and the UE, it will be based on the shutdown of the company and some limited arrangement involving severance. It will still leave all the workers without work and benefits in an economic environment in which there are no decent jobs to be found.

The occupation of Republic has been met with a nervous reaction from the political establishment. President-elect Barack Obama, a former state senator from Chicago, was asked his opinion at a press conference on Sunday. “When it comes to the situation here in Chicago with the workers who are asking for their benefits and payments they have earned, I think they are absolutely right,” he insisted.

In reality, Obama’s policy has been to fully support the efforts by Wall Street to respond to the economic crisis with a massive attack on the working class. He actively campaigned for the multibillion-dollar bailout of the banks and is currently demanding that autoworkers accept cuts in wages and benefits as part of any deal to provide loans to the auto companies.

The situation confronting the workers at Republic is hardly unique. It is being repeated throughout the

Chicago area, where there are thousands of factories like Republic, and across the country. Chicago Mayor Richard Daley warned recently of massive layoffs in the city for the remainder of this year and into 2009: “We’re talking huge numbers of permanent layoffs for people in the economy.”

Payrolls in the US shrank by more than half a million in November alone, a figure that will escalate in the coming months.

The occupation of Republic raises basic political and social questions: Who should control the factories and other productive forces, and in whose interests should they be run? Why should these productive forces, upon which the lives of millions of workers depend, be at the mercy of banks and corporate executives, and operated on the basis of private profit and individual wealth accumulation?

As the world economy enters the greatest economic downturn since the Great Depression, workers will have to confront a basic question—capitalism or socialism? The issue is not one of appealing to the employers for the best deal in exchange for the loss of jobs, but of taking control of the factories and the economy as a whole, and running them in the interests of social need.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact