

Rally for Republic Windows and Glass workers in Chicago

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On Wednesday, a rally was held in downtown Chicago in front the Bank of America (BOA) building to support workers occupying Republic Windows and Doors. The workers have occupied the factory since Friday. Republic told the workers only three days earlier that the plant was shutting down, citing BOA's withdrawal of the company's credit line.

Workers are demanding that they be given severance and vacation pay, in accordance with the federal WARN Act, which stipulates notification of layoffs due to plant closure must be provided 60 days in advance or else workers must be given severance pay to make up the difference.

The United Electrical Workers (UE), which is involved in negotiations with Republic and Bank of America, has maintained strict silence over the negotiations. On Tuesday, BOA revealed it had made an offer to extend loans to Republic so that it could meet payroll. The UE, however, has not confirmed this. Clearly, offers and counteroffers are being made, but negotiators have not shared any information with either Republic workers or their supporters. Union representatives say that any deal must be approved by the occupying workers.

Over 1,000 people showed up for the rally, among which were several dozen Republic workers. Other Chicago workers and youth came of their own accord to show solidarity with the occupation. The size of the rally grew steadily until the Chicago Police Department created a cordon to prevent it from extending into the street. A picket eventually spread completely around the skyscraper.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with Republic workers and their supporters at the rally. Republic workers expressed their determination

to carry on the occupation, and view their struggle as part of a far broader working class response to the economic crisis.

Raul Flores addressed the crowd, saying that workers were prepared to carry on the occupation until Christmas if necessary. This caused visible discomfort among the union officials behind him on the platform.

Indeed, the workers' determination at the rally stood in clear contrast to the perspective of the union officials and liberal protest groups who dominated the stage. The bureaucrats' speeches were characterized by hollow demagoguery. They demanded "victory," and led the crowd in numerous chants. However, they did not offer any perspective for how workers might fight plant closures and layoffs.

Among those who spoke were Rev. Gregory Livingston of Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Push Coalition, members of "faith based" groups, liberal protest groups, and bureaucrats from the UAW and SEIU. Fran Tobin, a representative of Jobs with Justice, a liberal group focused on workers' rights, presented the speakers.

Bob Kingsley, head of national organization for the UE, said that he had just come from negotiations and would return there after his speech. Kingsley gave a particularly demagogic and high-volume speech. But amidst all the yelling, he offered not a word about the negotiations with BOA, saying simply that rumors that a settlement had been reached were "erroneous."

Kingsley led the crowd in chants of "you got bailed out, we got sold out!" But in the same brief speech, he extolled the support the workers have received from President-elect Barack Obama. Neither he, nor any of the other union officials and protest group representatives, attempted to square their support for Obama with their denunciations of the Wall Street bailout. Obama and the leadership of the Democratic

Party have been the most enthusiastic proponents of the Wall Street bailout, which now totals nearly \$8 trillion.

Particularly remarkable was the speech of Mark Haasis, Illinois legislative director of the UAW. Haasis hailed the Republic workers, declaring that the UAW began with sit-down strikes in 1937. He falsely claimed that the UAW was engaged in "the same fight" for "good benefits and wages." In fact, in a desperate bid to rescue the profit margins of the Big Three US automakers, the UAW has offered to cut wages and benefits and shut down factories—*prior* to the beginning of negotiations.

In contrast to the courageous action of the Republic workers, the UAW heads insist that autoworkers can carry out no struggle against the automakers. This is in line with the union's decades-long role in seeking to suppress any opposition to concessions within its own membership.

Conspicuous in their absence were representatives of the Democratic Party. In the occupation's first days, leading members of the Illinois Democratic Party appeared at the occupied factory or endorsed the workers' demands. Among these were Obama, Jesse Jackson, Senator Dick Durbin, Representative Luis Gutierrez, and governor Rod Blagojevich. It may be the case that the Democratic politicians have advanced knowledge that a settlement is at hand.

The struggle of the Republic workers is limited by the narrow and self-serving perspective of the UE. The union seeks to reinforce the political subordination of the workers to the Democratic Party. This poses a real risk to even the minimal demands the workers are making. As support for the Republic workers spreads, their struggle increasingly threatens the political domination of the Democratic Party over the working class. Because of this, the Democrats and their allies in the UE bureaucracy seek to forestall the struggle.

If the Democratic politicians and bureaucrats cannot organize some form of agreement between the workers and the companies, they will intervene in an attempt to force a rotten settlement before the struggle, which is already unprecedented in recent US history, becomes a pole of attraction for the anger building up in the working class. This possibility they fear more than anything else.

Hundreds of thousands of workers in the US and the world over are facing plant closures and

unemployment, and all their attendant social consequences. The world economy is entering a deep economic recession, and corporations will seek to respond to this crisis with a massive attack on workers.

Whatever its consequences, the factory occupation of the Republic workers represents an historic step forward by the working class. Their struggle will encourage other workers to fight against the capitalists' attempt to make the working class pay for the economic crisis.

As the crisis of capitalism deepens, there will be more struggles like the one that has erupted at Republic Windows and Doors. The basic issue facing workers is the need to develop an independent political perspective, one directed at the source of the crisis—the subordination of economic life to the interests of private profit.

To fight layoffs, workers cannot rely on a strategy that seeks to apply pressure on any section of the political establishment, which defends the capitalist profit system. Only an independent strategy based on the mobilization of the working class as whole, and aimed at the socialist reorganization of the world economy—that is, the democratic control of the basic forces of production—can put an end to the hardships imposed by the economic crisis.



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