Stella D'Oro strikers rally as New York unions continue to isolate strike

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More than 700 people marched last weekend in the Bronx, New York to the scab-run Stella D'Oro cookie factory in what was advertised as a citywide rally to defend strikers who have been on the picket line for almost 10 months after refusing to accept wage and benefit concessions.

Eddie Marrero, who has worked at Stella D'Oro for 29 years, told the WSWS, "Today is a big day, a special day. This is the biggest rally we have had, and it shows that everyone is facing the same thing. Things are now turning into just rich and poor in this country. Can we stop this? I hope our strike is an inspiration to this work."

The statement reflected the anger and determination of the Stella D'Oro workers, whose strike began before the financial meltdown last September and is continuing as many more people, in New York City and around the country, are facing the same situation of wage-cutting and job losses.

This was the biggest march and rally held by the 136 members of Local 50 of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers (BCTGM) International Union, AFL-CIO. Despite the solidarity shown by workers, however, it is clear that the labor bureaucracy continues to keep the strikers isolated.

The Stella D'Oro strike began on August 13, 2008 after the private equity firm Brynwood Partners, headquartered in Greenwich, Connecticut, walked out of negotiations demanding the workers accept concessions of $1 per hour 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.

Today the Stella D'Oro strikers are being told by the BCTGM and the AFL-CIO to wait for justice from the National Labor Relations Board after it issued a "refusal to bargain" complaint charging Brynwood with violating the law. Bitter experience has shown that waiting for a legal victory from the NLRB is a dead end. The union is also claiming that the Obama administration will come to the aid of the strikers.

Oscar Hernandez, with 21 years at Stella D'Oro, explained what was happening with the strike and gave his evaluation of the Obama administration, "We went to the National Labor Board and are waiting for a decision of the judges there. We are saying that using scabs to make the cookies is an unfair labor practice. It is now before two judges appointed by Bush.

"They are bailing out the banks, but not the people. It is Obama doing this. Look at the generals who are now saying they will be in Iraq and Afghanistan for another 10 years. I don't think it is fair because Obama said he was going to get the troops out of Iraq. He is lying. We had hope with Obama, but now we have been on strike for over nine months."

Workers who came to the rally to support the strikers also spoke to the WSWS. Joycelyn Gill-Campbell, an organizer for nonunion domestic workers, said, "I am here to support the Stella D'Oro workers because they are part of the working class. The working class has been in crisis for long before this strike. The domestic workers have been part of this crisis since the days of slavery.

She said that the estimated 200,000 domestic workers in the New York metropolitan area—and up to 2 million nationally—are not covered by most labor laws and are forced to work long hours for low pay, while sometimes they aren't paid at all. "The problem is that the system has to change, and this can only happen

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when the working class stands together," she said.

Ilias Iliakostas is an unemployed painter. He told the WSWS, "I've been out of work for four months now. I was working all over Manhattan, but now construction throughout the city has been delayed because the banks are not making loans.

"Contractors, subcontractors, everything is run on loans. Since the banks have gone down, they have stopped lending. The banks have been given trillions by the government, but they won't lend for construction. Yet the CEOs are still getting their bonuses.

"New construction starts from companies like Tishman Construction, who become general contractors for everything. Then Structure Tone becomes an inside subcontractor. Painters and electricians are hired by the inside subcontractors, but all projects are on hold now. Last year they had the money to finish up some projects, but this year no new construction is starting. The banks are saying the money isn't being released by Washington, but I don't know what to believe.

"The painters still have a contract running for two more years. We were supposed to get a raise of $1 per hour in May. The Building Trade Association didn't open our contract over the May raise, but we didn't get it. The union said it would put the $1 raise into our annuity because a lot of money was lost from there by the banks. There was a lot of talk about cutting our wages by $8 an hour. That would have been a 25 percent wage cut. I assumed Obama would do well when he ran for office. Promises have been made, but nothing has been done. There will be just poor and rich. People are still losing their homes. It is like hitting your head against a brick wall wherever you turn."

Alonso Gomez, a 65-year-old Stella D'Oro worker with 19 years seniority, expressed his determination to fight concessions and his disenchantment with the union strategy of supporting Obama. "All the unions around the country supported Obama. They gave him money and the vote. When he got to the White House, Obama said he supported working people, and we believed him. Obama said he would put in a secretary of labor who would help with working class problems, but things aren't any better with Hilda Solis. I don't want to give concessions to anybody. I don't want cuts in anything. Not in wages. Not in benefits.

"The rich people in this country crashed the system, and now they are asking the working class to give concessions. There are disputes within the rich over which one will dominate, but when it comes to the working people, they agree: we will pay. But I won't give concessions."

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