

Stella D'Oro workers: "It is not right if they close down—the fight should continue"

Our reporter
14 July 2009

After 11 months on strike, Stella D'Oro workers returned to their jobs last week as the result of a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruling that found the company's owner, Brynwood Partners, a private-equity fund, guilty of unfair labor practices. In response, the financial firm announced its intention to close the plant within 90 days and move operations elsewhere. See "Stella D'Oro workers face plant shutdown." The World Socialist Web Site spoke to workers just after their return.

Phyllis Arvanitakis is retired from Stella D'Oro. She told the WSW, "I worked at Stella D'Oro for 20 years, from 1977 until 1997. It was good then. We worked full-time. I was a supervisor from the table and in Local 50. There were about 500 people or more working here then.

"The company was run by the Italian family when I started. First it was sold to Nabisco, then to Philip Morris, then to Kraft. Now Brynwood Partners owns it and wants to cut a dollar an hour each year of the contract, take away holiday and sick days. They brought in scabs to replace the workers. The workers were on strike for nearly a year, and now I hear Brynwood is going to close it. I think this is very bad."

Ghanshyam Amin is an electronics technician who started at the factory in 1989. He said, "The NLRB gave us a decision last week, but I think Brynwood will appeal it. What we know right now is that in 90 days Brynwood will close the factory. We have to defend ourselves. They just said they are intending to close. The union has not said anything except that we have to wait."

Cecilia Fusco has 40 years' service at Stella D'Oro. She said, "Now we may work for 90 days and then they may close the factory. It is not right for them to do this.

People need jobs."

Jorge Flores, with 16 years at the plant, said, "I think it is a trick. They want to scare us. They are supposed to pay us our back holidays. I think they will ask us for concessions. The trick is to ask us to cut our salaries again. We should say no to any concessions. Nobody wants to accept any tricks or pay cuts from these people; they have to treat us like people, and we are united on this.

"We are the workers who make everything in New York and around the world. I agree with and respect what the Republic Windows and Doors workers did in Chicago. They had a law there to make it legal. We have done everything legal here. If we have to do the same thing here, we should."

Richard Bereira has worked at Stella D'Oro for 25 years. He told the WSW, "I'm tired. They killed us in there today. Nothing works. We are hoping the factory won't close. I think the fact that they bought the company in 2006 and now want to sell it doesn't make sense. They want to show workers that the judge's order doesn't mean much.

"I think they are playing games with us. They say they don't have the money to pay us and now they don't have the money to keep it open. If they close, maybe they will pay severance, maybe they won't. Maybe they will sell it to someone else in three months or six months. It is not right if they close down. The fight should continue. I think it was a pretty good idea that they had at Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago. They did a good thing."

Alonzo Gomez, with 19 years seniority, said, "There is a bargaining committee which must accept any concessions that Brynwood may ask for again. The bargaining committee is not going to accept concessions even if they say we are closing in 90 days.

How can you accept being told you will only have one meal to eat a day instead of three? How can they ask the working class for concessions when transportation is going up, rent is going up and the cost of credit and borrowing is going up?

“It is very hard, but we have to keep struggling. They hired scabs to work for 11 months inside the plant. They cannot produce enough. Now we are making the cookies. I had to go all over the factory to find the pieces of the machine. I am a professional. I know how to make quality cookies. They want to destroy the unions. The union has said we will wait. Maybe the union leadership protects the company too much.”

Michael Filippou is a union representative and a lead mechanic. He said, “I think our victory with the NLRB decision was one of the biggest victories in the labor movement in the past few years. I don’t believe they are going to close because I think it is a trick. They are professional liars. They are doing it to scare the members, and they do it to force us to give concessions.

“They bought Stella D’Oro for \$17 million. I don’t think the math allows them to just sell it now. But if they do, occupation of the plant is a strategy we have to consider. I don’t think Brynwood has the right to close us down and throw us out of our jobs. We have lived and worked here for 60 years. We make the cookies. We have learned a lot of things in the last 11 months. If they go ahead and try to shut us down, we may have to occupy here like they did at Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago.”



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