An interview with Melissa Koch, co-director of The Red Tail

6 July 2010

Joanne Laurier recently spoke by telephone to Melissa Koch, co-director of The Red Tail*, at her home in Minneapolis, Minnesota.*

Joanne Laurier: This is a moving story, capturing something about the period and the experiences of millions of people. How did the film come about?

Melissa Koch: The original idea to go to China was mine. When I was supporting my dad during the strike and interning for Dawn [Mikkelson] on the film, I really felt that the story was much bigger than what was happening in Minneapolis, Detroit, San Francisco or any of the other bases that Northwest had.

And the real story was globalization, outsourcing. It was about the movement of these jobs and workers globally. I proposed to my father that we travel as a family to meet the workers on the other side of outsourcing, in order to connect face-to-face and learn about the broader issues. And then to bring the story back to his community, and my community, and the US.

It was a lot to ask your father to get out of his comfort zone and go talk to people on the other side of the world.

What I wanted out of the project was to create a different focus not only for my dad, and my family, but for the other workers who were involved. I wanted to get out the story of this historic strike that was being ignored by the mainstream media.

One of the first important moments was a screening at the Minneapolis-St Paul International Film Festival. The house was packed, people were turned away. It was filled primarily with mechanics and their families. It was such an active audience. So participatory—so much to say afterward. It felt like this tiny moment of healing, like people sticking it to the company in some way.

JL: Given the socialist traditions in Minneapolis, perhaps it was not surprising that such a film about a worker's response to globalization came from there.

MK: In Minneapolis, everybody knows somebody or is related to somebody who works for Northwest Airlines. It is the largest employer in the state of Minnesota.

I grew up in Minnesota because of the airline mergers in the 1980s. My dad lost job after job at smaller airlines and ended up in Minneapolis. Originally my family is from Buffalo, New York and Cleveland, Ohio. I think this whole city felt betrayed by Northwest and not just the city, but the state, which poured massive amounts of tax money into the company with promises of job security.

JL: What happened to your father's job is now a universal story in the US, especially given the scorched earth approach of the ruling elite toward its manufacturing base. Could you talk about your trip?

MK: Hong Kong and mainland China are very different places. In Hong Kong, the one worker that we spent the most time with was in the same boat as my dad, although the mechanics were not unionized and had never been. He had actually been part of a unionizing effort and a strike in 1999 which was busted by the company. All the people who were part of that organizing effort lost their jobs.

He had been an aircraft mechanic for over 20 years. Ten years with HAECO. He was making an incredibly small amount—it's in the film—I think it's about $22,000 per year in a place where the cost of living is as high as New York City. They were working very hard under the threat of having their jobs relocated to China. He felt very insecure in his job.

Nobody in Hong Kong or China is licensed. In Hong Kong somebody who is licensed and speaks English must sign off on all the work they do. In the US, each

mechanic signs off on their own work and because of the complicated nature of the manuals, they are not translated into too many languages besides English. But the people who are signing off on the work in Hong Kong get paid an enormous amount. This guy was trying to move up in the ranks and he had to learn English in order to do that.

In short, workers in Hong Kong had the same problems as we have here. In mainland China, it's definitely a different feeling. The workers who were being trained on site in the TAECO compound were from the more rural areas. Right now, it's a good job relatively speaking. But the management was saying that they had to diversify and look elsewhere for production, such as Vietnam or any number of places—the next downward spiral.

JL: The role of the AFL-CIO was despicable in ordering the pilots, flight attendants and mechanics to cross the picket line.

MK: In my household, I was brought up to believe that one's role as a union member is to never cross a picket line. To find out that the union leadership was ordering everyone to cross the picket line blew my mind. It was not that I did not have any consciousness about the union leadership, but when you're in the middle of such a fierce battle, it's unimaginable that that would happen. I believe that if AMFA had been given the support of the ground workers, flight attendants and pilots, the strike would have been won.

JL: Now all these sections of workers have suffered.

MK: There were many people who went out in support and did not obey orders, such as one of our producers, flight attendant Beth Wilson. Workers were left disarmed because AMFA could not do it alone. Traditionally, all of the anti-labor laws make it possible for a strike to be ineffective and allow companies just to walk out of here.

JL: Which indicates that the struggle is essentially a political one.

MK: I have learned that there is no way to create global solidarity around the interests of people in one country—when the American union leaders like Andy Stern talk about global unions, it is in reality very US-centric. Stern went into China to organize an official union at Wal-Mart and put on this big show.

The feeling of being with the ironworkers in Hong Kong was incredible. We felt embraced by the workers that we talked to. It felt right to be there and was a glimpse of what it would be like to have power globally with workers' solidarity. That will stay with me forever.