

Unions undermine struggle of Palermo's Pizza workers

Nicholas Russo, Niles Williamson
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For more than a year, workers have been engaged in a struggle against the Milwaukee, Wisconsin pizza manufacturer Palermo's Villa. The fight for improved wages and working conditions has been systematically isolated and betrayed by the trade unions seeking to unionize the workforce.

The struggle began in November 2011 when members of Palermo's largely Hispanic immigrant workforce approached the local Milwaukee immigrant rights group *Voces de la Frontera* with complaints about working conditions in the factory. Workers reported wages as low as \$7.25 an hour, forced overtime, and unsafe working conditions.

Voces responded by turning to the United Steelworkers (USW) to initiate a union organization drive at the factory. In order to provide a veneer of independence to the unionization effort, the decision was made not to call for a vote on the establishment of a USW local at the factory, but rather the establishment of a "Palermo's Workers Union" to bargain on behalf of the workers.

While workers saw the establishment of a union as a means of collectively organizing in opposition to the company, the interests of the USW were of an entirely different character. From the beginning, its aim was to exploit the anger of the workers to expand its dues base.

By the end of May 2012, a unionization petition had gained about 150 signatures, comprising three-quarters of the workforce. It was submitted to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) on May 29 to schedule a unionization vote. The following day, *Voces de la Frontera*, along with local Democratic Party officials, clergy members, and a small number of workers, met with the company to request recognition of the Palermo's Workers Union without a vote and to

discuss an immigration audit that had been called by the government a year before.

At the meeting, the company declined to voluntarily recognize the union and made known that the time period for 89 workers named in the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) audit as requiring additional verification had been reduced from 28 days to 10 days. In this way, the company was targeting workers who might be undocumented, leaving them vulnerable to being fired or deported.

Faced with the threat of imminent termination, workers walked off the job on June 1 and began picketing the factory. The next day, the company began hiring replacement workers, a move that elicited no response from *Voces*, the USW or the AFL-CIO.

Despite a stay of the audit by the ICE in response to a joint complaint from *Voces* and the AFL-CIO, the company terminated 75 of the picketing workers on June 8.

On June 11, the NLRB scheduled a unionization election for July 6. This was later delayed because of an appeal by the United Food and Commercial Workers to be put on the election ballot. It was then postponed indefinitely in response to an appeal by *Voces* to the NLRB to have the 75 fired workers reinstated prior to any vote.

The NLRB responded with a decision on November 21 that the company had violated no laws in terminating the 75 workers.

In a settlement reached between the NLRB and the company on December 4, Palermo's agreed to rehire nine workers ruled to have been wrongfully terminated. The company also admitted to violations of federal labor laws. This included statements by management that workers who joined the strike would lose their jobs; statements by management to workers about the

futility of joining a union; efforts by management to keep workers in the factory to stop them from joining the strike; and the company's maintenance of a list of union supporters.

The strategy of *Voces* and the unions in response to the victimization of the 75 workers has consisted of appealing to the NLRB. However, the government is not a neutral arbiter, as its previous endorsement of the company's action makes clear.

Moreover, a 2002 Supreme Court decision in *Hoffman Plastic Compounds, Inc. v. NLRB* states that the federal government cannot force a company to provide back pay or reinstate workers who are known to be undocumented, even if they have been terminated in the course of a labor dispute.

The unions (which have assets in the millions of dollars) and their supporters organized a token online donation campaign, which raised some \$3,500. This was combined with a campaign to boycott Palermo's products—a standard maneuver by the unions to avoid any broader mobilization of workers in strike action.

The Palermo's campaign is part of a broader effort to rehabilitate the image of the unions in the eyes of the working class and shore up their dues base by organizing low-wage workers throughout the country. These efforts have included protests involving workers at Wal-Mart and fast food restaurants such as McDonald's. The unions have been cheered on by an array of pseudo-left groups that operate in the orbit of the Democratic Party, such as the International Socialist Organization.

Many of the organizations backing the USW and AFL-CIO betrayal of the Palermo's workers—including the ISO and the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association—were deeply involved in the betrayal of the mass working class protests that erupted in Wisconsin in February 2011.

These protests against the attack led by Republican Governor Scott Walker on workers' rights, pensions and health benefits, were channeled by the unions behind the Democrats—who declared as a fundamental premise their support for austerity and wage-cutting. Their main concern was to preserve the organizational position of the unions as participants in this process.

There is mounting anger among broad sections of workers, including service workers and other low-wage employees. Immigrant workers are particularly

vulnerable, with companies exploiting their precarious situation to deny basic rights.

The response of the unions and their supporters is thoroughly cynical. The affluent middle-class layers that occupy leadership positions in the trade union bureaucracy have no interest except maintaining their own privileges, which they seek to defend at the expense of the workers they nominally represent. In a showdown with corporate management or the state, their aim is to demonstrate their utility to the powers-that-be by suppressing the movement of the workers.

Any effective industrial action or broader appeal to the working class is opposed in favor of legal appeals to the institutions of the bourgeois state, such as the NLRB. Every effort is made to channel workers' energy behind the corporate-controlled Democratic Party. The result is invariably the same: isolation and defeat.

The unions accept the inviolability of the capitalist system. In the context of global capitalism, in which workers in one country are pitted against their class brothers and sisters in other countries, the pro-capitalist and nationalist orientation of the trade unions means joining with the corporations in driving down wages and living conditions.

The experience at Palermo's demonstrates that in their efforts to secure their rights and defend their jobs, workers must place no confidence in the official unions. Every struggle poses the need to form independent rank-and-file committees that have as their primary aim the unification of workers in a common fight against the corporate elite. What is posed above all is the need for a political fight against the two big business parties and the capitalist profit system which they defend.



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