”We were greeted by a security officer with a gun”

El Milagro Chicago tortilla factory workers locked out after walkout

James Martin
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Dozens of workers walked off the job Thursday at the El Milagro tortilla factory in Chicago’s Little Village neighborhood and were subsequently locked out by management when they attempted to return. The workers are protesting dangerous working conditions in the pandemic along with low wages.

The workers were seeking a meeting to discuss grievances and demands with management by September 29 or protests will continue, according to organizers Arise Chicago, a Democratic Party-aligned community organization. Arise has called the lockout of the workers by management illegal.

According to a statement by Laura Garza, a former organizer for the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1, at least 85 El Milagro workers have been exposed to COVID-19 since the pandemic began and five workers died. El Milagro has more than 400 workers in the Chicago area.

El Milagro workers who walked out Thursday were threatened by security when they returned from their walkout. “I was able to go to work today,” said Martin, an El Milagro worker, at a press conference in Little Village. “First shift workers wanted to walk out to support the locked out second shift. We were greeted by a security officer with a gun intimidating us.”

Management has hired Illinois Security Services’ armed security guards to police the El Milagro facility and prevent locked-out workers from entering.

Irma, a locked out worker, said, “I’m pregnant and had medication and my purse in the plant and couldn’t get in. We had to call the police to get inside. El Milagro only let us in one at a time with a police escort.”

El Milagro workers who walked out also encouraged the night shift workers to walk out, gearing up for a fight against management, as they have received wide support among Chicago workers and across the country. Night shift workers put out a note saying that they too would join the walkout Thursday night.

Across the United States and internationally workers are reaching a breaking point after having been forced to work in dangerous sweatshop conditions in factories, schools and workplaces during the pandemic as more than 700,000 have died of the virus in the US alone.

The walkout by El Milagro workers is part of a growing resurgence of the class struggle and follows the recent sellout of the Nabisco workers strike in Chicago and across five states, where many workers had to work 16-hour days during the pandemic. The struggle of the El Milagro workers also takes place at the same time as ongoing strikes of Chicago mechanics and western Illinois Kone escalator workers, as well as contract battles heating up among John Deere workers and Dana auto parts workers, who have had to work up to 84 hours a week in dangerous conditions.

Teachers and educators in Chicago and across the country face similarly dangerous conditions with policies that have forced a deadly return to work and in-person education as 2,000 people die every single day and thousands of working class children are exposed to the Delta variant of the coronavirus.

In April last year, the El Milagro facility in Chicago closed temporarily after the virus spread and one worker died from COVID-19, as Chicago’s Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot did nothing to protect essential workers. Many essential workers in Chicago demanded the city offer more testing in the spring and pay for staying home to protect their lives,

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which the city largely failed to do as it sought to reopen schools and businesses in the region.

"We work in temperatures above 90 degrees Fahrenheit," said 51-year-old Pedro Manzanares to Univision, speaking of the intense heat in the factory. "We have a thermometer that measures temperature and measures humidity. The device shows a temperature of 92 to 96 degrees Fahrenheit every day," he added.

Many El Milagro workers have described the brutal conditions they faced as labor shortages during the pandemic hit the facility and management imposed grueling speedups. "The packages arrive faster and I have a few seconds to accommodate them, put them on the packaging line and grab another one. Imagine that before 50 boxes came out every 30 minutes, now 60 boxes come out and it is a greater pressure," Manzanares said.

A list of demands drawn up in a document to management also notes, "To this day, they have not resolved some of our demands such as sick days, our concerns about the food hall, and partially the salary issues, however, many other issues remain unresolved."

Workers at the facility are angry that the plant has been paying more to new hires to make up for labor shortages without increasing the wages of those that worked there for 20 to 30 years.

Conditions for El Milagro workers across the country are just as dangerous. The US Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) fined the company's San Marcos, Texas, facility $218,839 in June. The OSHA report notes: "Previous inspections by the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration have given the operators of a family owned tortilla factory south of Austin every opportunity to resolve its safety issues. Yet, OSHA has found the company still exposing workers to the risks of amputation and other serious injuries.

"Worker complaints of dangerous amputation hazards led OSHA to again investigate conditions at El Milagro of Texas Inc. and the agency's inspectors determined that the company once again failed to follow hazardous energy control procedures to prevent sudden machine start-up or movement during maintenance and servicing. As a result, inspectors cited El Milagro for three repeat violations related to energy control and four serious violations for failing to follow lockout/tagout procedures."

The conditions El Milagro workers face are felt by workers across the region. But figures like Jorge Mujica, a strategic organizer for Arise and a former Democratic Party aldermanic candidate, along with Democratic Socialists of America alderman Byron Sigcho-Lopez, who spoke at the protests, are seeking to prevent a broader struggle from developing.

The struggle of the El Milagro workers deserves wide support and must be expanded, but it must decisively oppose any attempt by organizations such as Arise to subordinate this struggle to the Democratic Party. Workers should review the lessons of the struggle of the Republic Window and Doors factory occupation in 2008, which was strangled and channeled into the Democratic Party. They should instead formulate their own demands through the formation of a rank-and-file workers committee, independent of the Democratic Party, to mobilize support among Chicago educators, Ford autoworkers, Kone workers, John Deere workers and Dana workers as part of a broader struggle against the entire capitalist profit system.

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