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on issues affecting African Americans
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**A Stirring of Interest in the Union
When Workers Occupy the Plant
Solidarity America
By John Funicello
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When Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago told its 260 workers last week that it was going to shut its doors in three days, so they had better find another job, it might have been just another plant closing in a time of economic turmoil in America.

But there's a difference. The Republic workers are members of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), a union that prides itself on being democratically controlled by the rank-and-file. Most often, they mean just that. So, when the local workers decided to take an unusual action like a sit-in, the international union backed them up.

During 25 years of mergers, downsizing, capital flight to other countries, and plant closings all across the country, not many people have shown interest. A local political leader might show up. A local daily might run a few paragraphs (unless there's violence), but the general view is to just let it play out and watch the workers go away.

UE members who work for Republic went into the plant and stayed there, while management was not to be found. Observers immediately noted the similarity between the UE in Chicago in 2008 and the United Auto Workers (UAW) in Flint, Michigan, in 1937.

Some, like Jesse Jackson, head of the PUSH/Rainbow Coalition headquartered in Chicago, was one of them. He visited the workers on site and speculated later that it just might be the start of a militant movement of workers across the U.S.

A major difference is that, in 1937, workers in all kinds of manufacturing industries,

everywhere in the country, were just testing out their new-found rights to organize, to form unions and to counterbalance the power of capital in a burgeoning industrial nation that showed great potential for growth.

The union movement as an integral part of a democratic society was showing the vigor of its youth and the promise that their unions held for themselves, their families, and their communities. It was a promise of equity, dignity, a rising living standard and, perhaps, most of all, of respect - on the job and off.

Americans today, according to what's reported in the press, feel that unions have become irrelevant or have outlived their usefulness. At the same time, union polling shows that a majority of workers in the U.S. would join unions if they could.

Unions have adjusted to the downward pressure of a command economy, run by Corporate America, with little interference from government at any level. For years, under the very real threat of flight or downsizing, unions have lowered their expectations at the bargaining table and, as a result, the wages of *all* American workers have fallen, whether they have a union contract or not.

Militant action has been tossed out the window and employers everywhere congratulated the unions for being so "reasonable," until, today, the percentage of workers in union has dropped to all-time lows and the disparity in wealth between labor and capital has not been greater since the Great Depression or the golden age of the American industrialists at the turn of the last century.

Along comes a union last week that said, "We're fed up. We're fired up. And we're not going to move." Not only did the employer break the law, but management thumbed its nose at the workers by saying not a word about paying workers what they were owed in severance and vacation pay. Republic management abdicated its responsibilities for a 60-day notice of mass lay-offs. The drama is playing out as this is written.

President-elect Barack Obama, the former senator from Illinois who lives in Chicago, declared his support for the members of UE Local 1110 who were sitting-in at Republic. He said that what happened to them is reflective of what's happening to workers all across the country.

UE blames the bank as much as Republic, because it was the recipient of billions of dollars in the recent bailout of financial institutions by Congress, but nevertheless cut off credit to Republic, which is what banks do when they think their clients are not acting in their (the bank's) best interest.

As this issue of Black Commentator goes on line, the standoff continues and it is not clear that the workers will at least get what they have earned. In a bankruptcy or any other financial trouble, employers and the "financial community" push the workers to the back of the line. If there is anything left, they might get to pick over the bones.

Newspapers and television reporters lose interest after a few days and that seems to have happened to the UE workers already. A few big city papers covered the story on the fourth day, but the rest have better use for their shrinking space or time for news.

Coca Cola workers used the plant occupation in Guatemala City in the 1980s, a time

when it was easy for union leaders to be killed or "disappeared." It didn't happen in that case because there was a groundswell of support from unions here in the U.S., along with numerous peace and justice organizations.

While there is not too much concern that UE Local 1110 members at Republic will be "disappeared," it is not likely that they will see a just resolution to their case, unless there is widespread and continuing support for their cause. One of the UE international leaders told Solidarity America that, no matter what happens, "We are not going down without a fight. No way."

Inside the Republic plant is a small group of workers who are fighting for essential rights for all workers and they won't go quietly. They might make only \$10-\$14 an hour, with a few benefits, but they are fighting for what is right. Every small victory - even simply getting their vacation and severance benefits - is a victory for all workers, an assurance that every worker has rights and every worker is important to this nation.

The U.S. government already has bailed out those who accumulate wealth by manipulating other people's money and they're having a hard time deciding to bail out the American auto industry. The bailout money has come from taxpayers like the Republic Windows workers, but there are few protections for them. No one bails them out when they have financial problems.

If the people are ever going to benefit from their labors in America, the giveaways to corporations and the wealthy and the destruction of our environment have to stop. What's the good in calling this a democracy, if there are no citizens, just subjects?

Every worker, everyone who works for a paycheck - and lives on it from month to month - should support the UE 1110 workers for the stand they have taken, and resolve to do the same.

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
BlackCommentator.com Columnist, John Funciello, is a labor organizer and former union organizer. His union work started when he became a local president of The Newspaper Guild in the early 1970s. He was a reporter for 14 years for newspapers in New York State. In addition to labor work, he is organizing family farmers as they struggle to stay on the land under enormous pressure from factory food producers and land developers. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Funciello.

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