

# **The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r**

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## **Keeping a Job in America is Hard Work Solidarity America By John Funciello BlackCommentator.com Columnist**

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When the 260 workers at Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago were told last December that they'd be without jobs in three days and that they would not be paid what they had coming, they did what any red-blooded workers would do. They occupied the plant.

Right now, because they took such an action, the members of UE Local 1110 are waiting to hear if a California company is going to buy the business and put them back to work. This is because they put themselves on the line, they gained the attention of the American people and workers in many other countries.

If you said that most workers would not do such a thing, you'd be right. Most workers are firmly under the impression that they have few rights on the job and with the way things have been going for the past 30 years, most workers (except for those who work under union contracts), are feeling lucky to have jobs, let alone demanding rights at work.

The boss they worked for violated national laws, by failing to give the workers the 60-day notice of mass layoffs and violated the law by planning to make his escape to another location. The sit-in got them eight weeks pay (under the federal WARN act), two months health benefits, and pay for all accrued, unused vacation, amounting to a total of \$1.75 million.

As might be expected, the workers - two-thirds of them Latinos and one-third African-Americans - experienced a period of considerable concern. First, there was the legal question of occupying their workplace. Then, when that seemed to be a smaller issue than they thought, they worried what they were going to do for a job to their families, especially a few weeks before the Christmas holiday.

Their union, United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE), immediately came to support the workers and with that support and assistance, they began to discuss their future and to formulate a plan.

Although they had not expected someone to come in and buy out the company and continue production, it was held out as a possibility. They also considered a worker-owned enterprise of some kind and they began raising money.

The union established a foundation dedicated to the reopening of the plant, but the announcement by a "green window business" in California, Serious Materials, that it intended to buy Republic and reopen it with its former workers on the production lines may make worker-ownership moot.

This week, Serious Materials was said to be in the final stages of working out an agreement to purchase Republic. "We are all hopeful about the possibility of Serious reopening our plant," said Melvin Maclin, Local 1110 vice president and one of the workers. "This would be a very happy ending to our struggle."

To have the purchase go smoothly and Serious Materials to put all the workers back on the job requires the bankruptcy court to act quickly, and that the creditors, trustee, and the judge to allow the California company to buy the plant soon. Otherwise, according to another Republic worker and union leader, Armando Robles, Local 1110 president, the business could evaporate and it will be difficult for Serious Materials to rehire the workers.

Too often, the courts and other legal entities fail to account for the pressures of daily life on working men and women. Even though they will receive the money they have coming, it's not easy for wage workers to last a long time without a job, and no one likes to try to live on unemployment benefits.

Although most of the Republic workers want to keep their local union together, particularly considering what they have accomplished, a majority are likely to be seeking other work, even as a temporary measure. State and federal government agencies announce nearly every day that more jobs are being cut, even from some of the largest and most successful corporations in the country, so the job prospects are not good for Republic workers.

And, while it was a good idea to consider a worker-owned business, it is difficult, at best, for workers to own - and work for - a company. In addition to the problems of raising capital to purchase and operate a plant, there is the problem of management. A worker-owned company would hire management, and then negotiate with the managers over wages, benefits, and working conditions. The worker-owners also must outline principles and set the goals for the new company.

Right from the start, banks are not so willing to loan money to worker-owned businesses, worker-owners learn early, because such enterprises tend to consider the welfare of the owners, rather than concentrate on profits. Banks reason that, if worker-owners are concentrating on preserving the company and their jobs, their decisions (and those of their hired management) might put their ability to pay back their loans in jeopardy.

It's one of the reasons that the popular press doesn't do much reporting on worker-owned businesses, even though they may be good for the workers and for their communities. But there just aren't that many of them.

Purchase of the former Republic plant was good news, then, and there might be an agreement even this week, but celebrations probably should be held off until the deal is complete. There once were some 500 workers at Republic, about five years ago, so the company was subject to cutbacks even when times were better.

Nothing can detract from the victory that UE Local 1110 achieved though, and workers around the world noticed. A Japanese union sent words of support and a copy of a report on the Republic occupation in one of their more conservative newspapers.

The message of Local 1110's action was clear to them: If you can do it, we can do it. Keep up the good work!

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**BlackCommentator.com** Columnist, John Funiciello, 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. Funiciell.

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