

New York: Threat to close Stella D'Oro after 11-month strike

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Over 130 workers at the Bronx, New York Stella D'Oro cookie factory returned to work last week after 11 months on the picket line. Their strike ended after an administrative law judge of the National Labor Relations Board ruled in their favor on an unfair labor practices charge against Brynwood Partners, a Connecticut-based private equity firm that bought the company.

The judge's ruling does not end the workers' struggle for their jobs, however. While the company can appeal the decision to the full NLRB, Brynwood announced on July 6 that it will close the plant completely in 90 days. As one worker told a reporter, "The decision we won, but nothing changed. We got the same problem."

The strike began in August 2008 after provocative concession demands from the company, including annual \$1 an hour wage cuts in each year of a proposed five-year contract, along with elimination of sick leave, cuts in vacation and holiday time and other attacks. Stella D'Oro had been founded in the Bronx in 1932, but was sold in the 1990s to Nabisco and later to Brynwood Partners.

The latest developments in the Stella D'Oro struggle raise crucial issues not only for these workers, but for every section of the working class facing the reality of layoffs, plant shutdowns and wage cuts.

The Stella D'Oro workers, members of Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers Local 50, remained determined over the course of 11 months, with not a single worker crossing the picket line as management hired scabs and continued production.

The union, however, followed the same scenario that has led to the systematic destruction of literally millions of jobs and the dismantling of workers' gains

over the past quarter-century. The strikers were left isolated on the picket line, with occasional demonstrations and appeals to Democratic Party politicians and a legal strategy of appealing to the state apparatus in the form of the NLRB.

The union and its "left" supporters are portraying the judge's decision as a major victory. Workers are being told that the company is bluffing in its plans to close the plant, and that justice can be obtained from the NLRB and the Obama administration. Various misnamed "socialist" groups have joined in serving as cheerleaders, rather than telling workers the truth about the issues.

It is understandable that some workers, after months of struggle, are eager to see the judge's ruling as a positive outcome of their fight. However, that is precisely the wrong lesson to be drawn.

The suggestion that Brynwood Partners is bluffing about closing the plant is dangerously false. Management issued a statement this past week stating, "The decision to close the Bronx bakery operations has not been made in haste or without significant planning."

The firm plans to move operations elsewhere. It announced its plans to close the Bronx facility in compliance with federal legislation mandating a minimum of 60 days' notice in cases of major layoffs.

The plant shutdown is meant to serve notice on every section of workers that they are lucky to have any job at all, as unemployment continues its climb to 10 percent and beyond, and that there is no alternative but to accept whatever the employers are prepared to grant in poverty wages and working conditions.

The overriding issue facing the Stella D'Oro workers as they battle the private equity firm, which specializes in acquiring and maximizing profits from what it terms

“lower middle market companies,” is that their fight is political. There is no purely trade union solution, even a short-term one, under today’s conditions.

Even if the NLRB on a few occasions throws a bone to the trade union bureaucracy in the form of a favorable ruling, the workers still face employers who are committed to the most ruthless cost-cutting and exploitation in the profit interests of their investors. The state apparatus, including the Obama administration in Washington, exists in order to defend these profit interests. The only answer to the continuing onslaught on jobs, wages and benefits is a socialist program that places the decisions on jobs and production in the hands of the overwhelming majority of the population, and not a handful of multimillionaires and billionaires.

Last December the Republic Windows and Doors workers in Chicago took the first step in a counteroffensive against the corporate onslaught on the working class when they occupied their factory to demand benefits they were owed. Their action attracted worldwide attention.

The Stella D’Oro workers must be prepared to follow the example set by the Republic workers. But any plant occupation or other industrial action must be combined with a political strategy that mobilizes the whole working class in the fight to defend jobs on the basis of a socialist program of public ownership under democratic control. The parasites and speculators cannot be allowed to dictate whether workers are able to work and support their families.

This raises the urgent need for a break with the Democratic as well as the Republican parties and the building of a mass independent political movement fighting for a workers’ government. The ongoing and deepening unemployment crisis demonstrates the urgency of a socialist program of nationalization of industry under workers’ control.



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