

*Published on Wednesday, December 10, 2008 by CommonDreams.org*

## **Workers of America: Wake Up! We All Need a Union!**

by Dave Lindorff

We workers of America, white collar, pink collar, blue collar, and no collar at all, have just gotten a wonderful example of the power of having a union. It's an example that should have every unorganized employee in America looking for a union organizer.

With the recession deepening, it's clear that major layoffs are in store, and that employers are going to be putting the squeeze on employees, even if they don't drop them. Individually, workers have little leverage in such a situation.

Look what happened to the workers at Chicago-based Republic Windows and Doors. The company was losing business, and according to some of its employees, had been in recent weeks secretly moving some heavy equipment out of the plant, possibly in preparation for relocation to some lower-wage location. Then its bank, Bank of America, one of the nation's largest financial institutions, and a recent recipient of \$25 billion in federal bailout funds from the US Treasury and the Federal Reserve Bank, informed the company that it would not supply credit for the firm to meet payroll. The workers were told by management that the plant would be shut down in three days.

At many companies across America, such news would be met by groans and tears, but by little else. What can an employee do when the boss says the company is closing its doors? Well, Republic's workers, members of the United Electrical Workers union, didn't take the news lying down. They took it sitting down on the factory floor.

The company's 300 workers quickly organized a round-the-clock sit-in occupation of the plant, vowing to stay until they got the 60 days notice that the law requires in the event of relocations. They also demanded that they be paid accrued vacation pay, which the company had said would be lost.

Bank of America was initially unmoved, but the workers began a national publicity campaign that was leading to protests at B of A offices across the country (one was planned for tomorrow here in Philadelphia). Boycotts were also being organized of the bank.

Then this afternoon, Bank of America folded, announcing that in the face of all the protests and the bad publicity, which focused much on the fact that the bank that was refusing to lend to a troubled American manufacturing firm had just received \$25 billion from taxpayers that was intended to unfreeze credit at the banks, it would after all extend credit to Republic Windows and Doors.

This is a happy ending story for the workers at Republic, who will at least get paychecks through the holidays, even if the future of their company remains iffy.

But more importantly, it is a powerful message to America's workers: united we can win. Divided and unorganized, we are going to be trampled.

There is a second message here too. Americans across the nation need to contact their congressional representatives and senators, and President-Elect Barack Obama (who backed the

workers at Republic), and demand that as one of the first acts of the new Congress, they pass into law the Employee Free Choice Act—a labor law reform that would end the ability of employers to stall off union elections for years, and to refuse to bargain a first contract with a new union. The act, which Obama, during his campaign, vowed to support, as did nearly all Democratic candidates for Congress, would require employers to accept the certification of a union whenever a majority of workers at a workplace signed cards saying they want a union, and would require them to negotiate and reach a first contract within 90 days.

Such an act would finally restore some semblance of fairness into the union organizing process, which has been skewed over the last 40-50 years to be almost impossibly in management's favor. Little wonder that union membership in the private sector has fallen to below 9% (from over 30% back in the early 1950s), even as polls repeatedly show that a majority of Americans would want to have a union at their job if they could get one.

The Republic Windows and Doors victory is a victory for all workers in America, and is a clarion call for more unions everywhere.

Let's get to work and organize.

Dave Lindorff is a Philadelphia-based journalist and columnist. His latest book is "[The Case for Impeachment](#)" (St. Martin's Press, 2006). His work is available at [www.thiscantbehappening.net](http://www.thiscantbehappening.net)

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