

From Venezuela to Chicago: “A Factory Closed is a Factory Occupied”

The cloud hanging over the economy continues to get darker. Literally millions of jobs have been lost in the past few months and the official unemployment rate is expected to enter double digits by the end of 2009. For many, the “American Dream” of a well-paying job and economic security is now a living nightmare. Across the country, working people are discussing the downturn, how it came about, who is responsible, and most importantly, how we can continue to put food on the table and provide for our families.

There is little doubt in anyone’s mind who is responsible for the current mess. Those responsible are the bosses, the CEOs and billionaires who, through ownership and control of the big corporations, decide the fate of millions of workers. Even though it is the working class’ labor that makes every wheel turn, every train run, and every light bulb shine, under capitalism, our labor power is treated as a mere commodity to be bought and sold. Perfectly good factories are closed and millions thrown out of work, all in the name of private profits.

December’s Republic Windows and Doors factory occupation in Chicago, the first in the U.S. since the 1930s, has enthused thousands of trade union militants, youth and activists, who have lived through a long period of defeats and setbacks. These workers’ struggle marked an important turning point for the modern labor movement. Faced with losing not only their jobs but also their back pay, severance pay and benefits, 250 workers, most of them Latino immigrants, occupied their factory for nearly a week. Such was the outpouring of popular support – despite the almost total inaction of the labor leadership – that Bank of America had to guarantee loans to the company to pay its workers its obligations.

Although the factory is still being closed, the bold action taken by the rank and file to defend their jobs has shown workers around the world that a class struggle policy does work and that it is possible to fight back against the bosses’ attempts to close our workplaces. A generalized movement of factory occupations in the U.S. may not yet be right around the corner, but the seeds for a revival of the militant traditions of the U.S. working class have clearly been planted.

In an interview with Mark Meinster of the United Electrical Workers, published in “Upside Down World,” it was reported that the Republic occupation was directly inspired by events in Venezuela: “Current UE Local 1110 president Armando Robles attended the World Social Forum in Caracas, Venezuela in 2006. There he heard from workers from Inveval, a ‘recovered’ factory in Venezuela. They had



inspired a movement of workers occupying and running factories, with the help of the government, that had been abandoned by bosses who had fled the country. Armando returned from that experience politicized and inspired. I visited Venezuela in 2007 and spent time visiting worker-run co-ops. I was struck by the workers’ investment in the revolutionary process and their ability to run production without management.”

For several years, the Workers International League has pointed workers and youth here in the U.S. to the example being set by workers in Venezuela. The global economic crisis creates the conditions for a global revolution. History shows that revolutions do not respect borders. As the Republic example shows, what is happening in Venezuela and Latin America in general *does* have an effect here in the U.S.

What is needed is a national movement, led by the AFL-CIO and Change to Win unions, that can put millions on the streets to push the federal government to fund our communities and services. The labor leadership needs to mobilize the workers to demand an economic recovery plan to re-open and capitalize closed factories, to nationalize them under public control, to be run under democratic workers’ control. Our unions must take up the fight for a working class bailout – let the rich foot the bill! And as they say in the occupied factory movement in Latin America: “A Factory Closed is a Factory Occupied!”

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Contact the Workers International League for more information on workers’ control and the occupied factories movement in Latin America and beyond. Join us in the struggle for a world where the majority democratically decides: socialism!

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