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The Chicago Sit-in: Has Obama's Election Spurred a New Mood of Union Activism?

By [Peter Dreier](#) - December 17, 2008

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TWO RECENT union victories may be harbingers of renewed worker activism. One came quickly in the wake of the ever-increasing economic meltdown. The other arrived after years of unsuccessful effort. Both reflect the optimism spurred by the Obama administration that has not yet taken power.

For six days in early December, 240 members of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), a small but feisty union that has always been in the labor movement's progressive wing, illegally occupied the manufacturing plant of Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago after their employer abruptly told them that it was shutting down the factory. Their bold action worked. They got what they demanded—sixty days of severance pay, earned vacation pay, and two months of health insurance coverage.

President-elect Barack Obama, by quickly endorsing the workers' protest, showed the kind of leadership that progressives have been waiting for, but didn't expect to see so soon. Indeed, Obama's statement of support for the Republic workers put him ahead of Roosevelt, who didn't embrace worried workers' escalating demands until after his inauguration in March 1933, when a quarter of the workforce was unemployed.

The Republic factory sit-in wasn't the only sign of a new mood of worker activism as the Obama regime begins. On Friday, December 11, after a brutal 15-year organizing battle, workers at the world's largest hog-killing plant in Tar Heel, N.C., voted to unionize. The workers at the 5,000-employee Smithfield Packing slaughterhouse had rejected union membership in 1994 and 1997, after being subjected to company's illegal harassment and intimidation in a state known for its anti-union climate. The workers' vote in favor of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) was one of the largest private-sector union victories in many years and the biggest in the UFCW's history. About 60 percent of the slaughterhouse's workers are African American.

"It feels great," said Wanda Blue, a hog cutter, told the *New York Times*. Blue, who is African American, makes \$11.90 an hour, and has worked at Smithfield for five years. "It's like how Obama felt when he won. We made history."

The Republic workers' protest in Chicago was reminiscent of similar sit-ins by workers during the Great Depression and civil rights activists in the 1960s. Like those earlier protests, the factory occupation was not a spontaneous action but a well-planned strategy. In November, several Republic employees noticed that equipment had disappeared from the plant. During a late-night vigil, they traced it to a nearby rail yard, and concluded that the company was planning to close their plant. (What they did not know at the time was that Republic's owners had set up a new company, Echo Windows, and purchased a window and door manufacturing plant in Red Oak, Iowa, where the workers are not unionized).

Anticipating the possibility of the factory's closing, Mark Meinster, a UE union organizer, talked with Armando Robles, a maintenance worker at the plant for eight years and president

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of the union's Local 1110, about the possibility of a sit-in. Robles liked the idea but realized it was risky. He worried that "we'd basically be trespassing on private property," he told the *New York Times*. "We might get arrested." But when Robles discussed the idea with other Republic workers, they embraced the plan. "We knew keeping the windows in the warehouse was a bargaining chip," said Melvin Maclin, a groove cutter and vice president of the union local.

On Tuesday, December 2, Barry Dubin, the company's chief operating officer, announced that Republic would shut the factory three days later. He explained that the Bank of America had canceled Republic's line of credit, making it impossible to stay in business—or even pay employees the severance and vacation pay they'd earned. The company immediately terminated the workers' health insurance. The union workers earned an average of \$14 an hour, and received health insurance and retirement benefits as part of their union contract.

On Friday, December 5, the union organized a meeting in the factory cafeteria. When Robles asked the workers if they would be willing to occupy the plant, all hands went up. The employees—80 percent of them Hispanic—shouted "*Sí, se puede!*" or "Yes, we can!" This slogan, popularized by the United Farmworkers Union under the leadership of Cesar Chavez in the 1960s, was the motto of Obama's presidential campaign.

The workers peacefully took over the plant, where some of them had worked for decades, and demanded that the Bank of America and Republic management find a solution. They set up three shifts, established committees in charge of cleanup, security, and safety, and banned alcohol, drugs, and smoking. The workers insisted that they wouldn't leave until getting assurances they would receive severance and vacation pay. Some even hoped to find a way to keep the plant open. The Bank of America, one of the nation's largest banks, said that the cancellation was routine business practice, caused by Republic's cash flow problem in the wake of the nation's declining housing construction.

Although the occupying workers were breaking the law, no politician called for the Chicago Police Department to arrest them. Millions of Americans, watching interviews with the workers on TV over several days, could identify with their plight—the loss of their jobs, their health insurance, and perhaps their homes—only a few weeks before Christmas.

The sit-in began the same day that President George W. Bush reluctantly acknowledged that the country was in a recession. He released a report revealing that employers axed 533,000 jobs in November, the biggest monthly cut since 1974. The official unemployment rate jumped to 6.7 percent. Now in its twelfth month, the recession is already the longest since a 16-month slump in 1981-82.

On Sunday, December 7, at a news conference to announce his Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Obama was asked by a reporter about the sit-in in his hometown of Chicago.

"When it comes to the situation here in Chicago with the workers who are asking for their benefits and payments they have earned, I think they are absolutely right," Obama responded. He added: "I think that these workers, if they have earned their benefits and their pay, then these companies need to follow through on those commitments."

With that statement, Obama used his bully pulpit to endorse the workers' protest and to put pressure on the Bank of America and Republic to forge a solution. Representatives of the company, the Bank of America, and the union began meeting at the bank's office in downtown Chicago. Representative Luis Gutierrez (D-Ill.) moderated the talks.

Americans around the country rallied to the Republic workers' cause. Through their unions, religious congregations, student organizations, and community groups, they sent money, food, clothing, blankets, and good wishes. The union set up a [Web site](#) to encourage

donations and to keep people informed about the sit-in. During the occupation, protesters picketed Bank of America branches around the country, including at the bank's Charlotte, N.C. headquarters. A coalition of unions and community groups, Jobs with Justice, held a rally at Chicago City Hall and threatened to organize a boycott of the bank if the problem wasn't resolved.

Bank of America had just received \$25 billion of the U.S. government's bank bail-out funds, designed to push banks to start lending money again. The bank's unwillingness to extend Republic further credit seemed coldblooded and hypocritical. "The taxpayer dollars going into these big banks are not for dividends, they're not for executive salaries," said Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), according to the *Chicago Tribune*. "They're for loans and credit to businesses just like Republic so they can stay in business and so these workers won't be out on the street unemployed."

Union officials and politicians suggested that the company may have violated the federal Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act, a 1988 law that requires employers to provide employees and community sixty days notice in advance of plant closings and large-scale layoffs. Chicago city officials called for hearings on Republic, which received over \$10 million in city redevelopment funds. They floated the idea of withdrawing hundreds of millions of dollars of government funds from the Bank of America.

The combination of the workers' sit-in, support from Obama and other politicians, and the accelerating bad publicity forced the Bank of America to give in. Republic's CEO Richard Gillman, who earns \$225,000 a year, initially demanded that the bank loan also cover the lease of his company cars, a 2007 BMW and a 2002 Mercedes, as well as eight weeks of his salary, but eventually he backed down. The bank then agreed to provide \$1.35 million for Republic's layoff package.

Although the Republic workers are now jobless, the union and Chicago city officials are trying to find new owners to re-open the plant.

The symbolism of the workers' takeover added credence to Obama's call for a major government-funded infrastructure program that will stimulate several million jobs—almost all of them in the private sector—and help jumpstart the ailing economy.

"There is always a demand for windows and doors," said UE President Carl Rosen. "But with Barack Obama's stimulus proposal, there will be even greater demand for the products made by Republic's workers. It doesn't make sense to close this plant when the need is so obvious."

During the sit-in, local residents and workers covered the walls of the factory's lobby with hand-scrawled signs, reported the *Los Angeles Times*. "Thank you for showing us all how to fight back!" wrote one person. "Here's to change, from the bottom up," penned another.

The Republic workers' protest struck a nerve with the American people, including many who don't share their plight but empathize with their predicament.

Do the actions of the Republic and Smithfield workers portend a new wave of grassroots activism, not only by workers and their unions, but also by community groups, environmentalists, liberal faith-based activists, housing crusaders, and the millions of Americans inspired by Obama's campaign who voted for the first time in November?

It will require vigils and rallies around the country to win a new New Deal policy agenda—an infrastructure plan to stimulate the economy, a "green jobs" investment program, a universal health insurance proposal, a strategy to help Americans afford housing, and a significant federal investment in public schools and college financial aid.

Union leaders and their allies are already gearing up for a major legislative battle over the

Employee Free Choice Act, a long overdue reform of America's pro-management labor laws, which have hindered union organizing. (For more on EFCA, read the following *American Prospect* [article](#).)

Hard times alone don't catalyze activism. People need some sense of hope that the activism will pay off. In 1932, FDR didn't campaign as a proponent of government activism or with a clear plan for economic recovery. But in the five months between his election victory and his March 1933 inauguration, Depression conditions had worsened, and grassroots worker and community protests escalated throughout the country. As soon as he took office, Roosevelt became more vocal, using his bully pulpit—in speeches and radio addresses—to promote New Deal ideas, including workers' right to collective bargaining. Union activists gave speeches and posted signs — on posters and billboards, and in store windows — proclaiming, "The President wants you to join the union." Workers took action to protect their jobs and defend their rights. Department-store clerks, bakers, laundry workers, longshoremen, meatpackers, steelworkers, tire- and autoworkers, and others engaged in protest, including the first wave of "sit-down" strikes demanding recognition of their unions.

Obama is the first president since Lyndon Johnson to embrace protest and civil disobedience. "Change comes from the bottom up," Obama said during his campaign. "That is how workers won the right to organize against violence and intimidation. That's how women won the right to vote. That's how young people traveled south to march and to sit in and to be beaten, and some went to jail and some died for freedom's cause."

Reform comes about, Obama often reminds his audiences, by "imagining, and then fighting for, and then working for, what did not seem possible before."

As FDR and LBJ did when pushed by circumstance and constituents, Obama can use his bully pulpit to encourage Americans to raise their voices. But if Americans want the country to change direction, as the November election results indicated, they'll have to follow Obama's campaign advice and the Republic and Smithfield workers' example: organize.

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