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Worker factory takeover taps into anger at banks

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The nation's grim economy now has a face: employees at a window-and-door factory that went out of business have refused to leave the building.

Instead, they have taken over the plant, becoming a symbol of mounting anger over the government's willingness to bail out deep-pocketed corporations but not ordinary people.

The **Republic** Windows and Doors factory closed abruptly last week after Bank of America canceled the company's financing. Since then, about 200 of the 240 laid-off workers have taken turns occupying the factory 50-60 at a time around-the-clock in eight-hour shifts.

Some are assigned to clean the plant and make sure it's safe while others take in food donations brought to the door. Outside, they've hung a huge American flag, and some are huddled around a fire set in a garbage can.

The employees say they will not leave until they get assurances they will receive severance and accrued vacation pay.

"There's a simplicity and straightforwardness to this particular case that anybody can wrap their head around," said James Thindwa, executive director for the Chicago office of Jobs With Justice, a national coalition of unions, community groups and other organizations.

Apolinar Cabrera, a 17-year **Republic** employee, lost his job and benefits just as his wife is about to deliver their third child.

"I don't know what to do," said Cabrera, 44, who worked in **Republic's** shipping department. He has been shuttling between the plant and home so he can check on his wife.

The protest along with vocal support from President-elect Barack Obama, Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich, civil rights activists and others has also created something else: a chance for unions that have been losing members and strength for years to show they still matter.

"I hope it's the beginning of a real fight-back movement," said Leah Fried, an organizer for the United Electrical Workers, which represents the **Republic** workers, who are mostly Hispanic.

Jobs With Justice organizers said it was time to seize the moment by reviving a tactic the sit-in that has not been widely used in the U.S. in decades.

The workers say the company violated the federal law because employees were not given 60 days' notice that they were losing their jobs.

The company did not return calls for comment, but the law allows a business to close without giving the required notice under certain circumstances, such as if it has a contract to supply a single company, which itself suddenly goes out of business, said Mark Johnson, president of Erisa Benefits Consulting in Grapevine, Texas, who said he was not familiar with the **Republic** case.

In a prepared statement, Bank of America said it had "worked with the company and shared our concerns about the company's situation and its operations for the past several months." But the bank said it agreed that **Republic** should try to honor its obligation to employees.

Most of the anger over the plant closure has been directed at Bank of America, not the company, which has not sought to evict workers from the building. Fried said the company cannot pay its employees because the bank will not let it.

Blagojevich on Monday ordered all state agencies to stop doing business with Bank of America to pressure the bank into using federal bailout money it received to help the laid-off workers.

"We hope that this kind of leverage and pressure will encourage Bank of America to do the right thing for this business," Blagojevich said outside the plant. "Take some of that federal tax money that they've received and invest it by providing the necessary credit to this company so these workers can keep their jobs."

Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois said he wanted to ask his fellow senators to remind banks that the bailout wasn't to be used for dividends and executive salaries.

"They're for loans and credit to businesses just like **Republic**," he said.

On Monday, about a dozen protesters, including some former **Republic** workers, rallied outside a Bank of America branch on the city's West Side, handing out fliers, carrying signs and banging drums. Several tried to enter the bank to deliver their message, but were turned away.

The support generated by the sit-in has surprised some workers.

"We never expected this," said factory employee Melvin Maclin, vice president of the union local that represents the workers. "We expected to go to jail."

Associated Press writers Deanna Bellandi and Caryn Rousseau contributed to this report.

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