East LA: Community Fights for Incorporation

The date for the election on the question of incorporation for the city of East LA is November 5 of this year. Despite attempts by a loud and well-financed opposition to block this election, the drive for basic democratic rights for the Spanish-speaking people of East LA is growing momentum.

Los Angeles County has a population of over two million Spanish-speaking residents, and in all of North America, only Mexico City has a larger Spanish-speaking population. The area which would be incorporated if the "yes" vote wins on November 5 contains a highly concentrated population of Chicanos and Mexican nationals. Under the present system, this area is administered by the county since it is unincorporated, and its residents face miserable living conditions directly attributable to the racist bureaucracy which runs East LA.

While the battles are growing on all these fronts, many activists view the incorporation of East LA as a basic right of the people there, and a way of advancing the struggles on other issues. Daniel Zaptia, a member of the La Raza Unida Party, which has been very active in the drive to incorporate East LA, told THE CALL that Chicanos and Latinos have no representation in running the affairs of East LA. He gave the example of racist supervisors among the county officials who supposedly represent East LA. One supervisor, Ernest Debs, is famous for his remark, "If you want to know what an area is like, you go and see it—for example, if you go to Anaheim, you see Disneyland. But if you want to see the capital of Latinos and graffiti, you go to East LA."

The area is carved up into 27 different tax bases, and seven different voting districts. There is no chance for the people to make their voice heard because the politicians use white supremacist demagoguery to create divisiveness between whites and Chicanos who, coming from totally different types of communities, vote in the same districts. A recent example of this was the failure of the campaign to recall Councilman Art Snyder, a racist politician who openly declared that some of his white constituents came before the interests of East LA. Incorporation could unify this area, and make city government the focus of the struggle for greater representation for the area and the democratic rights of Chicanos.

During the last few years of county administration in East LA, conditions have deteriorated sharply. Unemployment, and other attacks on the community. Besides relying on physical force to break the strike, the company also obtained court injunctions to halt all picketing from around the plant. And the union, Teamster Local 853 refused to sanction the strike citing legal problems which would open the union to legal action from the company. Even after a heated union meeting with 150 of the workers at Dasco attending, demanding some sort of action, Teamster officials would only pass a resolution to approach the company about the firings.

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The policing of East LA is the most heavily policed area in the state. The Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, the Los Angeles Police Department, the California Highway Patrol, and the police departments of the surrounding cities all have jurisdiction in East LA. Most of the surrounding cities all have jurisdiction in East LA. It was not until the company started hiring more young, educated workers that the workers began to organize.

In this understanding that the fight for democratic rights, equality and incorporation must be waged and in this light that mass support must be won.

Strikers at Dasco faced dozens of Oakland police who attacked their picket line and tried to break the strike. (Call photo)

DASCO STRIKE SUMMED UP

This article is taken from Getting Together, an Asian community newspaper in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The wildcat strike which ailed the paper processing facili- ties at the Oakland facility was ended on May 17 with most of the company's 250 workers returning to work. The walkout, which closed the facility for more than a month, began on May 1 after the company fired one of the Teamster shop stewards, left many issues unresolved. Some 80 workers were fired by the company during the course of the walkout, and many more were never met. At a meeting of predominantly Asian students on the U.C. Berkeley campus after the strike, Roberto Hernandez, the shop steward who was fired by the company sparked the walkout, Hector Pena, Ben Martinez, and G.T. Wong, all of them strike organizers talked about the wildcat and tried to analyze the different factors which led to the end of the strike. All of the students who attended the meeting had at one time or another walked on the picket line to show their support for the workers.

HAZARDOUS CONDITIONS

Recounting the history of Dasco, Hernandez noted that the company refused to pay the workers of the Teamster shop stewards, left many issues unresolved. Some 80 workers were fired by the company during the course of the walkout, and many more were never met. At a meeting of predominantly Asian students on the U.C. Berkeley campus after the strike, Roberto Hernandez, the shop steward who was fired by the company sparked the walkout, Hector Pena, Ben Martinez, and G.T. Wong, all of them strike organizers talked about the wildcat and tried to analyze the different factors which led to the end of the strike. All of the students who attended the meeting had at one time or another walked on the picket line to show their support for the workers.

Poor pay and hazardous working conditions sparked earlier walkouts, and the poor ventilation and leaky roof of the plant raised the hor of federal investigators last year. It was, however, the treatment of the Third World workers by the company which both Roberto and G.T. rapped the most. The majority of the workers at Dasco are Latino and there are also many Chinese workers. In both of these groups, immigrant workers account for most of the labor.

Hernandez recounted how the supervisors of the company had a policy of recruiting workers from villages in Mexico, sending whole families to work. This exploitation of the company and the need for the immigrant families to survive economically in the country, allowed the workers to be paid substandard wages of $2.20 an hour. Even while admitting the failure of the strike, organizers at Dasco were anxious to sum up the lessons. "It was primarily a question of organization, or the lack of it. There was no organization in the plant which could carry on communication between the different shifts of workers, and the majority of workers were not employed there long enough to form a base. Without that type of organization, our spontaneous unity could not last too long."

With the influx of these younger workers, the plant experienced its first walkouts. Last summer, a one-day walkout was staged because of poor ventilation and another one was held during the winter when the company lowered the thermostat in response to President Nixon's plea for energy conservation. And in both instances the spontaneous walkouts were successful, the demands of the workers were met. One of the most significant changes to occur at the plant during this time was the election of Hernandez to the position of shop steward for the Teamster union. Many of the Third World workers saw his election as a step forward, especially since he was bilingual and could communicate with many of the Chicano workers about work and the union.

When Hernandez was fired on May 1 for allegedly refusing to transfer to another machine, 41 day-shift workers immediately protested and they too were fired. Refusing to submit to the company's unfair practices, a picket line was set up at the front of the plant. The walkout, which had started on May 1, continued.

As the strike continued, Dasco revealed the extent to which it would go to break the strike. Hiring the notorious Richard Canny Security police, the same private force which was used to break up picket lines during the Sears strike and the bottlers strike, Dasco had the police force use dogs and clubs to tear down the strikers' signs and flags and break up a pot luck dinner held by the workers on May 8.

POLICE ATTACK PICKETERS

Oakland's own police force, constantly patrolling the area since the beginning of the strike, attacked the peaceful picket line on May 9, injuring six people and arresting three pickets. While such an outbreak of police force was meant to intimidate the workers, the response from the workers and the community was one of outrage.

Besides relying on physical force to break the strike, the company also obtained court injunctions to halt all picketing from around the plant. And the union, Teamster Local 853 refused to sanction the strike citing legal problems which would open the union to legal action from the company. Even after a heated union meeting with 150 of the workers at Dasco attending, demanding some sort of action, Teamster officials would only pass a resolution to approach the company about the firings.

"We learned some important lessons," commented Hernandez, "and that is that the courts and the police would only act in the interests of the company. They certainly weren't out there to protect or to serve us. Some of the women workers who were on the picket line for the first time were shocked by the actions of the police."

What finally broke the strike was the lack of organization among the workers to maintain economic support of the striking workers. Whereas the walkouts in the past were settled in a day or two, the nature of this strike—the refusal of the company to rehire personnel they had fired—made prospects for settlement very dim after the first ten days. Many of the workers had families to support and with no strike fund there was no way for the strike committee to keep up the welfare of the strikers.

LACK OF ORGANIZATION

After more than two weeks on a strike without union support and no financial means of supporting the striking workers, the strike committee called off the wildcat, allowing the workers to return to their jobs.

"We have to admit a lot of errors in the way the strike was carried out," said Hernandez. "This strike was a very tentative one—there was no planning or preparation for it on our part. Once it began it was hard to see where it would go."

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While the end of the strike was a setback for the Dasco organizers, the fired workers plan to carry on the struggle to get rehired. An organization of the fired workers is in the making and while the use of the courts has been discarded to win their demands, the workers have two main focuses in the coming months. First, make links with those workers within the plant to carry on a petition campaign for their rehiring and second, focus in on the upcoming arbitration between the union and the company which will decide whether or not they will be rehired. Even if the arbitration fails, the workers are preparing for a long struggle that will even go to the contract negotiations in November to get rehired.

"The wildcat showed that you can't always win, workers have to be organized and prepared. But it did show that workers, regardless of race or nationality could be united. Our potential is there . . . "

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