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Organizing Ourselves: Drywallers' Strike Holds Lessons for the Future of Labor Organizing

Abstract

[Excerpt] In October 1991, drywall hanger Jesus Gomez complained to the drywall contractor for whom he worked that his check was short \$60 for the week. The contractor refused to pay up the difference – and he felt safe doing so. He'd conducted business this way for years and his predatory attitude told him these drywallers, (poor, immigrant, Mexican, often undocumented, and without a union to defend their interests,) were in no position to challenge the status quo. Besides, the economic recession and construction slump provided added insurance against worker discontent.

Unfortunately for drywall contractors, Gomez was more than discontented. He was determined to do something about this state of affairs. Gomez began to speak with other drywallers at their homes and at worksites throughout southern California, slowly fashioning the complaints and frustration into collective strength and a plan of action. When the group became a few hundred strong, an ultimatum was issued to contractors: Either you agree to increases in piece rates and other conditions by June 1, 1992 or we will strike.

Keywords

diversity, discrimination, construction industry, contractors, union organizing



Organizing Ourselves

Drywallers' strike holds lessons for the future of labor organizing

■ *José De Paz*

In October 1991, drywall hanger Jesús Gómez complained to the drywall contractor for whom he worked that his check was short \$60 for the week. The contractor refused to pay up the difference—and he felt safe doing so. He'd conducted business this way for years and his predatory attitude told him these drywallers, (poor, immigrant, Mexican, often undocumented, and without a union to defend their interests,) were in no position to challenge the status quo. Besides, the economic recession and construction slump provided added insurance against worker discontent.

Unfortunately for drywall contractors, Gómez was more than discontented. He was determined to do something about this state of affairs. Gómez began to speak with other drywallers at their homes and at worksites throughout southern California, slowly fashioning the complaints and frustration into collective strength and a plan of action. When the group became a few hundred strong, an ultimatum was issued to contractors: Either you agree to increases in piece rates and other conditions by June 1, 1992 or we will strike.

The deadline came and went without any agreement from the contractors. In fact, the contractors, convinced that the workers

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would not dare strike, arrogantly told workers, "Go ahead and strike; in a week or two you'll be back begging for jobs."

The drywallers were not bluffing. They declared a general strike and began mass picketing at worksites in Orange county. Dozens of drywallers abandoned their jobs and joined the strikers each day. Construction would grind to a halt everywhere the picketers went. Organizations like Hermandad Mexicana Nacional, los Amigos de Orange County, League of United Latin American Citizens and others stepped in to provide critically-needed food, clothes, contributions and moral support to the strikers. Local media started covering the strike and contractors began to worry.

Somewhat frustrated, but still with the air of "patrones," contractors pulled strings to get police agencies to descend upon the strikers at picket lines. Local police departments and county sheriffs unleashed their institutional brutality and conducted massive raids against the strikers. Charges of assault, grand theft, vandalism, trespassing, kidnapping, resisting arrest, and disturbing the peace were leveled against those arrested and ridiculously high bail amounts were set. Hundreds were turned over to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). No resource was spared in the attempt to break the strike and bring back "law and order" to sunny California's residential construction industry.

Far from being intimidated, however, the strikers recognized the broad repression as a sure sign that they were on the right track. Contractors had to be feeling the pressure or they would not have flexed all their political muscle with such intensity. But, while the drywallers were proving themselves very capable of taking on the contractors, the mass arrests, INS raids, and continuing police harassment threatened to deflect their focus from the contractors. They needed someone to deal with this burden so that they could concentrate on the strike. The drywallers turned to the California Immigrant Workers Association (CIWA) for support.

THE DRYWALLER DEFENSE TEAM

CIWA, established in 1989 by the AFL-CIO's Organizing Department, is an associate union membership organization with about 6,000 members, mostly Latino immigrants. CIWA's goal is the empowerment of the Latino community through collective bargaining and the assertive exercise of that community's civil and human rights.

CIWA's first acts were to instruct the strikers of their rights when confronted by police and/or INS agents, and to assign legal

CHRONOLOGY OF THE DRYWALLER'S STRIKE**October 1991**

Drywall worker Jesus Gomez complains that his check is short \$60. The contractor refuses to pay.

November 1991-May 1992

Gomez visits other drywallers at their homes, work sites, bars and organizes a few hundred of them into a force for change.

June 1, 1992

Faced with intransigence from contractors, drywallers launch a strike against the entire southern California residential drywall industry.

July 2, 1992

At a picket line in Orange County, 160 strikers are arrested. Sixty of them are turned over to the INS for deportation.

July 7, 1992

CIWA commits to assisting drywallers with legal defense, support coordination and media campaign.

July 14, 1992

Massive rally in Orange County in support of drywallers' strike.

July 23, 1992

SEIU Justice for Janitors hold rally and march in support of drywallers. The drywallers never make it to the rally. After chasing them off a picket line in Hollywood and forcing them into blocking the Hollywood Freeway in both directions, Los Angeles Police arrest 68 strikers, beating seven of them in the process. The same afternoon, hundreds of drywallers hold a protest march at Hollywood division of LAPD.

July 24, 1992

Under pressure from CIWA attorneys, all those arrested in Hollywood are released on their own recognizance. Also, CIWA and the Mexican Consulate pressure LAPD into not getting INS involved this time.

July 28, 1992

About 500 drywallers march in protest at LAPD headquarters in downtown Los Angeles.

August 8, 1992

In San Diego, close to 500 drywallers and supporters march against San Diego Police and rally at Chicano Park.

August 18, 1992

500 drywallers again march against LAPD headquarters.

August 20, 1992

All felony charges against "Hollywood 68" are reduced to "disturbing the peace." No jail time.

August 25, 1992

Drywallers protest in front of INS in Los Angeles, where the first deportation hearings are held against some strikers. At concurrent press conference, CIWA blasts INS for mispending taxpayers' money prosecuting strikers in a labor dispute. Volunteer legal defense team. Some cases are still pending, but others are thrown out of court by the immigration judge, giving drywallers their first victories!

September 13, 1992

Drywallers join Mexican Independence Day Parade through East Los Angeles.

September 15, 1992

Hundreds of drywallers detained by L.A. County Sheriffs at picket line in Palmdale. Final results: 14 arrested, 9 of them turned over to INS. INS detains another 5 on their way to the picket line. One striker severely beaten in INS custody.

October 1, 1992

Drywallers launch intensive picketing in Palmdale/Lancaster area.

October 22, 1992

Hundreds of drywallers join mass demonstration against NAFTA in San Diego.

November 10, 1992

Group of 30 drywall contractors (about 60% of the industry) agree to negotiate with the Carpenters Union, whom the drywallers chose as their representative.

November 30, 1992

Hundreds of drywallers protest at Palmdale City Hall, where 9 drywallers are tried in a makeshift court by a roving judge instead of at the courthouse in Lancaster. Authorities want to get this over with by Christmas. Drywallers' response: If we cannot have a merry Christmas, Palmdale/Lancaster cannot have one either.

December 19, 1992

A formal agreement is signed with about 52 drywall contractors from different counties. The strike continues with the goal of unionizing the entire industry.

Stay tuned. . .

observers to picket lines and demonstrations. They also began monitoring all arrests to ensure that public defenders would not treat these cases as just another part of their workload. It was critical that public defenders knew that these were decent, law-abiding drywallers involved in a labor dispute, and not the criminals portrayed in police reports.

Since individuals do not have the right to a public defender in immigration court, those detained by the INS presented a different challenge. CIWA was determined to send INS the message that it would not be allowed to play an anti-drywaller role in the strike. To this end, CIWA put together a drywaller defense team with volunteer immigration attorneys from such organizations as the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, Public Counsel, MALDEF, LAFLA's Immigrant Rights Office, the Mexican American Political Association, CARECEN and others. The attorneys would exhaust every possible legal avenue open to each detainee, thereby inflicting heavy financial and administrative costs on the INS. If successful, this strategy would cause INS to think twice before deciding to conduct further raids against the strikers.

Although the strikers were still subjected to intense harassment on their picket lines, not having to deal with legal defense allowed them to strengthen and expand their struggle from Orange County to all of southern California. Additional drywaller committees were established in San Diego, Riverside, San Bernardino, Ventura and Los Angeles counties. As the number of strikers grew to over 4,000, the arrests and INS detentions passed the 600 mark.

The drywallers' determination and internally-developed organizing strategies, coupled with the enthusiastic support and contributions from unions and the community, were rewarded on November 10, 1992 when some 30 contractors, representing about 60 percent of the industry, agreed to negotiate an agreement and contract with the strikers. The drywallers chose the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners to represent them.

As of this writing, over 52 contractors have agreed to double the piece rate to 7 1/2 cents per square foot and a formula to provide health benefits to drywallers, among other things demanded by the strikers. The strike is not over and the drywallers have vowed to continue until the industry is 100 percent unionized. Anything less than that would expose their hard-won gains to a slow but steady erosion and eventually set them back to square one. The smart money is betting that they will achieve their objective.

OF THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE AND BY THE PEOPLE

Three main ingredients account for the success of the drywallers strike. First, the determination of the strikers. They were not doing "strike duty". They embraced their cause 24 hours a day and everything else became secondary to the strike. Additionally, the strikers were aware that they were being oppressed not only as workers but also as Mexicans, which made their bond twice as strong. This came particularly handy when entire families were evicted from their homes for non-payment of rent and had to move in with one or more families in a single dwelling.

Second, organized labor's considerable contribution to the independent drywall strike fund. In addition to individuals and community organizations, more than 21 AFL-CIO affiliated unions and six Central Labor Councils in California made significant donations to the fund.

Third, CIWA's unique participation. Besides coordinating legal and immigration defense, CIWA served as a communication bridge between the strikers and police agencies. CIWA also functioned as the strikers' spokesperson with the media (particularly the Spanish-language media) and as the coordinator of support from Latino community and labor organizations. CIWA's unique combination of skills and its dual credentials in the labor and Latino communities enabled it to convert the drywallers' struggle from a localized labor dispute into a Latino workers movement.

The drywallers' strike is already widely recognized as a labor struggle of historical proportions, providing valuable lessons for the future growth of the labor movement, particularly in California with its large Latino population.

The drywallers launched their strike as independents, without the full institutional support and protection of any specific labor union. They assumed full responsibility for the success or failure of their struggle, which meant that they owned it from the very beginning. Instead of waiting to be saved by an institution, they made the first move towards shaping their own destiny. The drywall strike was led by drywallers. The organizing strategy was developed by drywallers. The decisions were made by drywallers.

As an independent strike, the drywallers were not subject to the stifling anti-worker NLRB provisions and regulations as unions are. Also, instead of targeting only one or even a few contractors, the strikers went after the entire residential drywall industry. Moreover, the drywallers did not let the odds against them overwhelm them into inaction. The maxim of "engaging only in those



battles that you are sure to win" might have obscured the thinking of orthodox professional organizer types. The pragmatic thing might have been to wait until the economy and other conditions were more conducive to victory. Excessive pragmatism often paralyzes.

Finally, the drywallers exhibited long-term vision. They made it clear from the very beginning that they wanted to institutionalize their gains by making representation by a union of their choice a non-negotiable demand.

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

Organized labor should be viewing the drywallers' strike as the shape of things to come, rather than as an isolated incident. Mexican and Latino workers in California have a rich tradition of organizing, but they've often lacked the resources to succeed. At the same time, many in the Mexican and Latino communities, who are unsatisfied with superficial "cultural" gains (e.g. the ubiquitous Cinco de Mayo celebrations, Hispanic Heritage month, and cultural diversity fairs,) are concluding that the pivotal and most tangible measure of Latino progress is the size of the paycheck at the end of the week. That check, they have learned, will grow only through collective bargaining.

It is very chic nowadays to talk about empowerment. Thus, it

is very tempting to romanticize the drywall movement by categorizing it as a great instance of Latino empowerment. The fact is that, although the drywallers did take a self-empowering step by launching their independent strike, it would have remained only an attempt at empowerment had organized labor remained only a sympathetic spectator. Fortunately, labor decided to help make a difference, and it did.

But we cannot rely on good fortune. The drywallers' experience must become the rule rather than the exception. Perhaps the most important significance of the drywallers' movement is that it represents an unprecedented opportunity for organized labor to become stronger. Unions need to seriously invest in themselves by investing in independent organizing efforts by Latino and immigrant workers, with all the heretofore unexplored issues and challenges that independence brings. Immigrant Latino workers have very definite ideas about organizing and, when they sense genuine respect, will bring a new aggressiveness and power base to the labor movement. In turn, these workers also need to learn how unions function in the U.S.

Immigrant workers constitute new energy, new ideas, and the future of society in places like California. They are here and they're not going anywhere. And they are strong, for they are the ones who refused to succumb to physical or economic death in their countries of origins and, without a Statue of Liberty to welcome them at the Mexican border, overcame all odds to get to the United States.

Mexicans and Latinos in the United States have a lot to offer but have yet to find an institution where they truly feel they belong; an institution they can own in partnership with other Americans; an institution they can strengthen with their numbers and their sweat and their dues. There's no need for them to re-invent the wheel of organized labor. Independent Latino worker struggles need to institutionalize themselves, as the drywallers did, by joining, strengthening, and being strengthened by the collective power of the American labor movement. ■

RESOURCES

"L.A. Labor and the New Immigrants," By Jeff Stansbury in
LRR 13: Solidarity Across Borders