

TimeOut Chicago

Power surge

As the national economy sank, one local union rose.

By Jonathan Messinger

July 23, 2009

Years from now, we'll look back on December 2008 as Chicago's zeitgeist moment. Or, we could do it right now. First, our junior senator had just been elected President, and with his transition team based here, he delivered regular press conferences from the Loop that outshone the guy in D.C. And then our governor was ushered out of his Ravenswood Manor home in a tracksuit and handcuffs, and the national news networks had to learn how to pronounce his name.

But not even those two guys could speak to American anxieties the way a story that erupted on tiny Goose Island could. On Friday, December 5, Republic Windows & Doors shut down its factory on the island, laying off all of the workers and denying them severance and vacation pay. The well-organized workforce, which had suspected something was up for more than a month, staged a nonviolent occupation of the plant. It was a live-action drama of a fairly academic issue, up to that point. Republic was closing because, its owner Richard Gillman claimed, Bank of America had frozen its line of credit after the loan crash. But Bank of America had just received millions in the first wave of government bailout money.

"It was just a perfect storm of factors," says Kari Lydersen, author of the new book, *Revolt on Goose Island* (Melville House, \$16). "It had the sort of cartoonish bad guys, it was right before Christmas, the employees were all hard-working and likable."

Lydersen, a Chicago-based reporter for the Washington Post, took to the story immediately. Provocative independent publisher Melville House, based out of Hoboken, New Jersey, contracted her to write a "live book," reporting on the occupation as it happened, and blogging about it on the publisher's website. The idea was to write the book as the drama unfolded, and then package it together in a paperback version. But Lydersen says the book, which was published last month, took a different form, partially because of the feedback she received while blogging.

"There were four people whom I had really in-depth dialogues with, whom I didn't know before, that really informed the writing of the book," she says. "A lot of the information I gathered, about a lot of the historical struggles in labor, had a concrete effect on the book."

Revolt clocks in at only 161 pages, but it manages to tell the story of the six-day occupation, its historical precedents, and what it could mean for the future of the labor movement in full. For a book turned around in such a short time, it digs ably into the nuances of the closure, including the questions regarding the blame: Gillman

made some questionable decisions leading up to the closure, but Bank of America also fought (eventually conceding) loaning enough money to pay the workers their due.

“That’s one of the fascinating things about this story,” says Lydersen. “Gillman wasn’t the target, the UE’s strategy was to target Bank of America, even though Gilman perfectly fit the mold of caricatures of an unsympathetic owner.”

Revolt also studies a new chapter in Chicago’s labor history. As Lydersen observes, Chicago’s unions have not exactly been known for their grassroots, or their squeaky-clean images. The workers had voted to become a part of United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, a smaller, independent union, which had gained a reputation for being led more by its members than its administrators, a far cry from the days of John Serpico, the union boss indicted for racketeering and a host of other charges in 2001. The Republic employees were led by the 9-5ers.

“It would definitely be too early to say everything’s different now with the unions,” says Lydersen. “What’s interesting is that all of the mainstream unions, the key leaders, they were there supporting the UE. It’s maybe not a trend yet, but I did get the feeling from everyone involved that there is this new massive energy for something new, or maybe it’s better to say something revived.”