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Strike at Suiza Dairy, a question of food sovereignty

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Foto: Berta Joubert-Ceci

NOTE: At the time of finishing this article, it was reported that the PR Police' Tactical Unit Force had arrested 16 protesters in front of the gates of the Swiss Dairy to make way for the strikebreakers.

It has been more than a month since the General Central of Workers of Puerto Rico has been on strike against the Peruvian capitalist association Grupo Gloria, which manages the dairy processing company Suiza Dairy (SD) here. This is one of the three milk processing companies in this country that together represent one of the few remaining native food industries.

A collective agreement was reached between the CGT and SD, but the company's contribution to the health plan was not included because it had been established during the negotiations that SD would respond at a later time.

To get more details on this strike, Struggle-La Lucha interviewed the union's secretary, Scott Barbés Caminero. Excerpts from this interview are included here.



Scott Barbés Caminero

SLL: What is the reason for the strike?

SBC: "We are demanding that the contribution to the medical plan be resolved, since the health conditions suffered by our workers are closely linked to the work they do. And that given the privatization of health services in Puerto Rico, the company then has to assume the health costs of these workers. There is a high incidence of cancer, bone problems, diabetes, high blood pressure. Our coworkers have even died when parking these trucks, after working 14, 16, 18 hours and there they lie in the truck, with heart attacks."

"We are demanding also, that the agreement reached with the group of the

company's salespeople be respected. But after having reached an agreement on the issue of commissions and salaries, the

company from Peru determined that it was not going to honor it and in less than 24 hours after reaching that agreement, they withdrew it from the negotiating table."

"In addition, we denounce the retaliation against the workers for exercising their democratic and

constitutional human rights, above all, the right to strike. "The company, instead of bringing a proposal to solve the conflict, what it did was the massive dismissal of more than 400 workers, establishing an illegal lockout."

"We are at a critical moment in the struggle because of the insistence of a judge who issued a cease and desist order on the stoppage activities we carry out here. And we have information that the company has hired a violent security company to break the strike and allow another company access to clean all these machineries. We state that we are not going to allow either the strikebreakers or that subcontracted company because that job belongs to the workers of our union and we are not going to let them take their jobs."

"That is why we ask the people solidarity in order not so much to support the strike, but to combatively defend the picket line because the life of the entire dairy industry of Puerto Rico is at stake since it is the largest and most powerful and they want to destroy it."

SLL: What has been the role of the government?

SBC: "On the part of Fortaleza (official residence of Governor Pedro Pierluisi) there has been no positive expression; On the contrary, he said that he is not interested as long as the product reaches the homes. The food security of our people is at stake here; This is important within the basic food basket and evidently the government

has no interest in the people. It is an extremely abusive neoliberal government who this week increased electricity and water fees. So, in that sense the government is not protecting the people."

"Faced with this reality, our approach has been that someone has to intervene in what is happening here. It is an essential industry and what the company Gloria from Perú is doing in Puerto Rico is what other companies did, for example, with the agricultural industry. Here there was a massive attack against an industry that provided food, like chicken, to the entire island from the moment the first egg was born until it reached the families' tables. Then, these large multinational industries that distributed frozen chicken in the world began an attack against our industry until it was destroyed. And that's what's happening here. We even have the suspicion that the company's objective is to destroy or bring to a minimum the production of fresh milk in Puerto Rico and then completely take over the ultra-pasteurized milk or UHT milk industry. Killing the livestock industry in Puerto Rico for the benefit of farmers from abroad who would bring imported UHT milk to Puerto Rico. Do 'dumping', just like they did with the eggs and chickens. And basically subject our country to more dependency and food insecurity towards the benefit of other industries that have nothing to do with the people of Puerto Rico and much less with our health and national production. This obviously continues to weaken the people, our work force, and continues to create conditions that push Puerto Ricans out our land.

That is why we are fighting this struggle; because here there is much more at stake than the contribution to the medical plan that we are demanding."



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