

ITUC calls on French Multinational Roquette Frères to end US lockout and respect UN Global Compact principles

3 June 2011: On 28 September of 2010, Roquette Frères, a privately held French multinational company, aggressively locked out workers at its facility in Keokuk, Iowa, members of Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers, and Grain Millers (BCTGM) Local 48G.

After engaging in a brief period of “surface bargaining”, the company refused to extend the collective bargaining agreement and continue bargaining. Instead, it insisted that workers and their union accept major concessions from the union, including massive cuts affecting new employees. It also proposed to allow widespread contracting out of bargaining unit work and the replacement of permanent workers by low-paid temporary workers.

Roquette Frères claims that its actions are fully in line with the Global Compact principles and international labour standards, which it has pledged to support. It has committed to respect its 10 principles, which include, “Businesses should uphold the freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining”.

Sharan Burrow, General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation observed, “Union busting in the form of a lockout, in this case a well-prepared ‘ambush’ is a brutal attack on the human rights of workers. The International Labour Organisation, in its more than 90 years of existence has never accepted a company ‘right to lockout’. We call on Roquette Frères to return to the bargaining table and to heal the wounds it has inflicted on workers and on the community during this long and bitter conflict”.

In an attempt to use international mechanisms to help resolve the dispute, in December of last year, the AFL-CIO, the IUF, and the ICEM sent a letter to the UN Global Compact explaining the dispute and urging that measures be taken to help resolve it. The three organisations also made a submission to the US National Contact Point, charged with implementing the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, urging them, in co-operation with their French counterpart, to take measures to help bring the conflict to an end.

Since that time, the IUF has made two additional submissions to the Global Compact. The first one reported that inexperienced replacement workers allowing a serious leak of 30,000 gallons of process waste water to enter a Keokuk storm sewer leading to the Mississippi River. The second, described a worker afflicted with a terminal cancer that doctors believe was a work-related illness and who was denied his medical benefits because of the company lockout.

In a letter to UN Global Compact Georg Kell, Sharan Burrow called on his office to act. She stressed that the Global Compact should not accept that any company having embraced the Global Compact should treat its principles “with contempt”.

The ITUC represents 175 million workers in 151 countries and territories and has 305 national affiliates.