

10 Questions

with Joan Sekler, documentarian
of *Locked Out*.

interview by Joshua Stecker

The documentary *Locked Out* tells the David and Goliath story of how ILWU union mine workers in Baron, California, faced financial hardships but stood strong during their 107-day lockout by the Rio Tinto Group, a multinational corporation. In the fall of 2009, the corporation decided to drastically cut the workers' benefits when the union contract expired. On January 30, 2010, the workers voted unanimously to reject the company's proposed contract and the next day they were locked out of work. Joan Sekler captured this story in her film *Locked Out*, which makes its local premiere at the Warner Grand Theatre in February (date and time TBD).

What was the inspiration behind tackling the subject matter of *Locked Out*? I was born and raised in New York City and members of my family have been in various unions which led to good wages and working conditions at their places of work, so I have always supported union representation. On January 31, 2010, the *Los Angeles Times* printed an article about a lockout of 560 miners in the desert town of Boron, California. They were members of the ILWU, Local 30 and



One of the union miners from *Locked Out*.

I called the President of the local and got permission to interview the workers on camera. Their employer, Rio Tinto, a giant multinational mining corporation headquartered in the UK and Australia, had thrown out the old contract when it expired in the fall of 2009, and proposed a new contract, which slashed many benefits that the workers had won over the years.

What challenges did you face in producing the documentary? How long did it take to shoot? It's important in filming any struggle to get interviews from both sides. While the miners and their families were eager and willing to tell their stories on camera, the biggest challenge came from the representatives of Rio Tinto, who refused to be interviewed. Fortunately, one of Rio Tinto's managers did some short interviews on network news so I was able to use that footage. Also, Rio Tinto had an annual shareholder meeting in April, 2010 in London and one of the locked out miners from Boron spoke at the microphone and asked questions to the CEO. All this was recorded and posted on the Internet so I used this as well to give Rio Tinto's point of view. The lockout lasted for 107 days so the shooting took close to four months.

Have you screened it previously? How has it been received? A big screening for all the Boron miners and their families took place on Saturday, October 31st at Boron High School and they were overjoyed at seeing the whole struggle on camera and bought hundreds of DVDs. Since then, the documentary has screened at the Labor Technology conference in San Francisco and will be screening at various labor film festivals around the country, including the Western Workers Labor Heritage Festival in California in January, 2011.

How did you get started as a documentarian? I was a volunteer news reporter for KPFC Pacifica Radio in L.A. in the 1980s. In the early 1990s, a filmmaker in L.A. asked me if I wanted to volunteer to work on producing a documentary, which got me started.

What training did you have? I have never had any formal training at a film school. Everything I know about documentary filmmaking is from on-the-job training.

What other films have you produced? My last documentary, *Unprecedented: The 2000 Presidential Election*, is the story of what happened in Florida during the 36-day recount and how G.W. Bush landed in the White House. It won numerous awards, screened in over 50 film festivals, and was on



Joan Sekler

television in the U.S. and around the world.

How did you come to get *Locked Out* screened at the Warner Grand? The ILWU Locals 13, 63, and 94 are based in San Pedro, as well as the Harry Bridges Institute, and they offered to host a screening of *Locked Out* at the Warner Grand Theatre in February. We're still working on an exact date and time.

As a filmmaker, what did you take away from the experience of making *Locked Out*? The main lesson learned from the experience of producing *Locked Out* was that, contrary to the depiction of the working class on television and in the movies as dumb, as rednecks, as couch potatoes, etc. the Boron miners were highly intelligent, were well-organized and used the technology of the Internet, with websites and Facebook to reach out to thousands of workers around the globe for support. They also spoke on radio and television, at conferences, in classrooms, at rallies, etc. to discuss their struggle. It was very inspiring.

If people can't make the screening, will the film be available on DVD? Yes, they can log onto my website (Lockedout2010.org) and click on "Buy the DVD."

What's next for you? After I pay off my credit card debt, which I incurred from making this documentary, I plan to start a new film on the future of the baby boomers in the U.S. since Medicare and Social Security are being attacked, massive layoffs have occurred, millions of families have lost their homes and the middle class is sinking. **spt**

Locked Out will screen in February (date and time TBD) at the Warner Grand Theatre (478 W. 6th St., Downtown). For more info, call Joan Sekler directly at (310) 968-6566.