

The ISO and the Cooper Tire lockout

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Some 1,050 workers at the Cooper Tire & Rubber plant in Findlay, Ohio are entering the second month of a bitter struggle against the company's demands for new concessions, including revamped production targets that could slash wages by 40 percent, as well as cuts in health care and vacations. The workers were locked out November 28 after they rejected the company's offer.

Three years ago, the United Steel Workers of America (USW) union agreed to a two-tier wage at Cooper, with new hires making a mere \$13 an hour. They also agreed to a wage freeze and other concessions amounting to \$30 million over the period of the contract. The claim then was that Cooper needed the concessions in order to reverse falling profits, with the alternative being the shutdown of the factory.

The company is now making large profits, and its CEO has nearly doubled his compensation since 2008 to \$4.7 million. But Cooper is demanding even more onerous give-backs.

In standing up to the company's blackmail, the Cooper workers are fighting for workers all across the country—and, indeed, internationally—who face ever more brutal demands for cuts in wages, jobs and conditions. And like workers in auto, steel, transit, communications, the service industry and the public sector, the Findlay Cooper workers face in the trade union apparatus a hostile force that is working to isolate and betray their struggle.

Neither the international union nor USW Local 207-L has called a strike or taken any action to halt company-organized scabbing. The union has made it clear that it opposes joint action with USW workers at Cooper's plant in Texarkana, Arkansas, where the contract expires in January. Although it sits on a \$150 million strike fund, the USW has refused to provide strike benefits to the workers, who were denied jobless benefits by the state for several weeks.

At a rally held in Findlay December 17, union leaders told workers nothing about their talks with the company. They

proposed no action beyond impotent protests in the form of a "corporate campaign"—a diversionary tactic pioneered by the Steelworkers union in the 1980s, when it and the AFL-CIO as a whole were repudiating any form of class struggle and embracing labor-management "partnership."

In opposition to the mobilization of the broad support that exists for the Cooper Tire workers, the union is telling them to place their faith in worthless appeals to the National Labor Relations Board and Democratic politicians. The USW, along with the rest of the unions, is backing Obama's reelection bid, despite the Obama administration's support for wage-cutting in auto, steel, and manufacturing in general.

In the name of reviving US manufacturing and boosting "made in America" exports, the Democratic Party, along with the Republicans, is using mass unemployment to permanently reduce the wage gap between American workers and super-exploited workers in the cheap-labor havens of Asia and Latin America.

In the face of this treachery, the International Socialist Organization (ISO) is doing its best to disorient and confuse the rank and file and give a boost to the union leadership. The fake-socialists of the ISO are seeking to do in Findlay what they have done in the mass protests and strikes earlier this year in Wisconsin and in every other struggle of the working class—use hollow rhetoric to disarm the workers and protect their own alliance with the trade union apparatus and the Democratic Party.

An article by Shaun Harkin posted December 16 on the ISO's web site, socialistworker.org, is little more than a hack piece written for the benefit of the USW officials. There is not a word of criticism of either the USW International or Local 207-L. Nor is there so much as a suggestion that more aggressive action should be taken to halt the scabbing, or that the union should call out the other Cooper Tire plants, including the Texarkana plant, in solidarity with the Findlay workers. The idea that the union should provide strike benefits to the workers is not broached.

The ISO, supposedly an “international” organization, does not criticize the union’s promotion of “America first” economic nationalism as a means of lining US rubber workers up behind “their” bosses and pitting them against their class brothers and sisters internationally.

The method employed by the author is to impute to the union the determination and principled stand taken by the workers. Thus Harkin uncritically quotes Local 207-L President Rodney Nelson as saying, “They [management] have to understand that people are not going to keep working for less and less.”

But when it comes to the massive concessions imposed on the workers in 2008, the union is suddenly out of the picture. It was entirely, it would seem, the responsibility of the workers themselves. Harkin writes: “In 2008... workers reluctantly accepted steep concessions—a wage freeze and a two-tier wage rate for new hires...”

The ISO does not mention the sabotage of the 12-week Goodyear Tire strike of 2006-07 by the USW, or the union’s support for two-tier wages at a growing number of plants.

Instead, it quotes a length and without criticism the USW’s statement on the unfair labor practices charges it has filed with the National Labor Relations Board—a legal ploy by the bureaucracy to attempt to work out a rotten compromise that will include most if not all of the company’s concessions demands.

Finally, the ISO holds up as a model for the Findlay workers the referendum mounted by the unions and the Democratic Party that overturned an anti-workers’ rights law imposed last year by the Republican governor and Republican-controlled state legislature of Ohio. “The struggle against SB 5 [the anti-worker law] galvanized Ohio’s labor movement and demonstrates the spreading mood of resistance,” the article declares.

The unions and the middle-class “left” groups like the ISO that are allied to them are cynically using the repeal of SB 5 to promote the fiction that workers can defend their rights and conditions through the Democratic Party and by seeking to pressure the institutions of the capitalist state. In fact, the unions opposed SB 5 only because it undercut their institutional and financial interests, not because they oppose the cuts in jobs, wages and social programs being carried out at every level of government—federal, state and local.

The Findlay struggle is another indication of the coming entry of the American and international working class into historic battles. There are critical political and programmatic issues that must be clarified in order for the working class to defend its past gains and achieve new ones. Among them are the need to establish the political independence of the working class from all parties and politicians of the capitalist class and the necessity to fight consciously for a fundamental, revolutionary—i.e., socialist—change in economic relations, in order to end social inequality, poverty and unemployment.

The old official trade unions are an implacable obstacle to such a struggle. They have long ceased to represent the workers. They have become businesses that serve the interests of a right-wing, wealthy layer of officials who provide cheap labor to the companies and receive in return a share in the profits extracted from the exploitation of the workers.

These rotten organizations have to be swept aside and new, democratic organizations of struggle formed by the workers themselves. A new, revolutionary leadership must be built among the workers to lead these struggles. Key to this fight is exposing and politically defeating the “left” organs of the bourgeoisie and the trade union apparatus such as the ISO.

The authors also recommend:

Mobilize the working class behind the Cooper Tire workers!

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