

# Cooper Tire workers fight wage cut demands in northern Ohio

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More than 1,000 workers were locked out of their northwest Ohio factory on November 29 shortly after voting to reject the demands of Cooper Tire & Rubber Company for sweeping wage and benefit reductions.

The company's decision to employ strikebreakers and its threats to permanently close the plant or move its headquarters have provoked widespread anger in Findlay, an industrial town of 41,000 less than an hour south of Toledo. The factory, which produces tires for light trucks and passenger cars, is the one of the largest employers in the county.

Three years ago, the United Steelworkers Local 207L accepted \$30 million in concessions after the company began a "review" of its cost structures with the aim of shutting its least profitable US plant. Among other concessions, the USW accepted a two-tier wage system that pays new workers around \$13 an hour, half of what long-term workers earn. After attaining these givebacks, as well as large tax breaks from state and local governments, management decided to close its Albany, Georgia plant instead.

With the company now making large profits and paying top executives multimillion-dollar bonuses, workers are determined to recoup what they lost. "We have to fight for the younger people," Chico Ramirez, a 62-year-old worker with 25 years in the plant, was quoted saying to the *Wall Street Journal*.

"This stinks," said Teresa Brown, 41, who has worked 12 years at the factory. "My husband and I both work in there. We have a kid in college, and I don't know how I am going to pay for college—all because they want to be greedy. They are just trying to bully us."

Cooper Tire reported a third quarter profit of \$17.3 million. Last year it paid CEO Roy V. Arnes a total compensation package of \$4.7 million, up from \$4

million in 2009 and \$2.6 million in 2008.

In a letter to local residents Chris Ostrander, president of Cooper's North American tire operations, said, "The bottom line is we need a competitive agreement. Not all jobs are created equal, nor should there be an expectation to pay an amount higher than what the market determines is fair." Ostrander later told the *Wall Street Journal*, "This isn't about corporate greed. We want to protect these folks from themselves."

Cooper wants to implement a new program measuring productivity in a job classification, and establishing individual pay rates for each worker. Under this scheme, United Steelworkers Local 207L President Rod Nelson told the *Toledo Blade*, workers who maintain the plant's machines, for example, would have their pay cut 40 percent.

In addition to more "flexibility" on pay, management wants larger employee contributions for health care costs, increases in productivity and tighter restrictions on vacation time. Workers voted these demands down by a two-to-one margin at a local meeting the day before Thanksgiving, and have manned the picket lines each day to demonstrate their determination to fight.

But the corporation, a multinational corporation with operations in the southern US, Mexico, United Kingdom and China, has been able to take the initiative because the USW has done nothing to wage a serious fight. Instead it has limited its response to filing an unfair labor practice suit with the National Labor Relations Board, a government body that routinely buries such appeals and more often than not sides with the corporations.

USW officials on the local and International level have informed the company that they will not call a strike even if the lockout is ended and have made it clear they are willing to accept concessions to end the

dispute.

Moreover, it is clear the company is basing its demands for “competitive wages” on the two-tier system the United Steelworkers has already accepted throughout the rubber industry, as well as the recent contracts signed by the United Auto Workers with General Motors, Ford and Chrysler.

In 2006, after isolating the bitter two-month strike by rubber workers against Goodyear Tire, the USW accepted two tier-wages and the tearing up of long-standing work rules. In exchange, the union executives were given control of a \$1 billion retiree health care trust fund. Afterwards, the company reduced its US plants to 16 from 29. With the money in the trust rapidly depleting, the USW now wants to divert a portion of workers’ profit sharing into the fund.

In the name of “labor-management partnership” and boosting competitiveness against foreign tire producers, the USW and the United Rubber Workers before it have overseen the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs. The strategy of the USW now is to entice the global tire manufacturers to bring production back from Mexico, China and other low-wage countries, by offering ever lower wages in the US.

USW officials recently dismissed Cooper Tire’s warning that it will face tougher competition when the tariff on Chinese tires expired next fall. The advantage Chinese producers once held was changing, they said, due to Chinese workers winning pay increases, which are closing the gap with US labor costs.

Rubber workers, led by socialist and left-wing militants, played a decisive role in organizing the new mass industrial unions. The 1936 sit-down strikes in Akron, Ohio, then known as the Rubber Capital of the World, would soon spread throughout the auto industry, culminating in the Flint sit-down strike against GM exactly 75 years ago.

In the struggle at Cooper Tire, rubber workers should revive the militant traditions of workers who came before them and reject the policies of class collaboration, nationalism and support for the corporate-backed political parties, which have produced a disaster for the working class.

A new road of struggle must be opened up, beginning with the formation of rank-and-file committees independent of the USW, to mobilize the widest support in the working class, in the US and

internationally, to defeat the attack on jobs and living standards.



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