

Mobilize the working class behind the Cooper Tire workers!

Jerry White
15 December 2011

A struggle of enormous significance for the working class is being waged in Findlay, Ohio, an industrial town of 41,000 people in the American Midwest. More than a thousand rubber workers at Cooper Tire are defying wage-cutting demands by the multi-national company, which locked them out on November 28.

Every worker can identify with the situation the tire workers confront. Three years ago, complaining of falling profits, Cooper threatened to close the Ohio plant unless workers accepted sweeping concessions, including a 50 percent wage cut for new-hires. After the United Steelworkers union acceded to the demands, and state and city officials showered the company with millions of dollars in tax breaks and other incentives, Cooper Tire decided to shut its Georgia plant instead, wiping out 1,300 jobs.

The corporation is now raking in large profits and its CEO, Roy V. Armes, was paid \$4.7 million last year, up from \$2.6 million in 2008. Nevertheless, the company is insisting it must have more concessions to remain “competitive” and keep the plant open. New demands include a piecework scheme that would reduce a worker’s pay to the entry level wage of \$13 an hour if he or she fails to meet production quotas.

What is happening in Findlay epitomizes what is going on in every industrial town across America, and, for that matter, throughout the world. The campaign of wage-cutting that followed the financial crash of 2008 has proven to be more than a temporary state of affairs. The corporate and financial elite is using the economic catastrophe it created to permanently and dramatically lower the living standards of workers. As one locked out worker at Cooper Tire noted, “It’s like we’re going back to the turn of the last century.”

The last three decades have seen the systematic deindustrialization of America and the rise of a

financial aristocracy whose vast fortunes have little connection to the process of production. In so far as any industrial production is to remain in the US, it is to be carried out on the basis of the most brutal exploitation of the working class and the closing of the wage gap between American workers and their counterparts in China and other low-wage countries.

The reactionary outlook of the ruling class was summed up by the CEO of American Crystal Sugar, which is currently locking out 1,300 workers in North Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa, who likened the gains won by workers through generations of struggle to a “disease” that had to be eradicated.

When Cooper Tire issued its ultimatum, the workers revolted, saying enough was enough! Management responded by locking them out and hiring scabs. In an action initiated not by the union but the workers themselves, hundreds of workers, family members and community supporters surrounded the factory with a human chain on December 2. Having endured more than two weeks without a paycheck, the workers remain defiant and determined.

But Cooper Tire workers cannot fight alone. The company is ramping up production at its other US plants and has purchased a new plant in Serbia to fill orders in the event of a long lockout. Meanwhile, Cooper Tire and the state of Ohio have blocked workers from collecting unemployment benefits in an effort to starve them into submission. Even more ominous, the corporate-controlled media has begun smearing workers as “violent,” paving the way for court injunctions, frame-ups and arrests.

The biggest danger arises from the isolation of the struggle by the United Steelworkers (USW) and other unions. The 12-week strike at Goodyear tire in 2006-2007 was sabotaged by the USW, which is

opposed to any struggle that threatens its intimate relations and financial ties with the corporations and the government. Once again, at Cooper Tire, the USW has rejected a serious struggle and is telling workers to rely on the National Labor Relations Board, federal mediators, local Democratic politicians and the Obama administration.

This is a recipe for disaster. The corporate offensive against the working class enjoys the backing of both big business parties and all of the official institutions of the state. The campaign of wage-cutting against industrial workers began with the Obama administration's demand that GM and Chrysler workers accept unprecedented pay and benefit concessions, including the expansion of the hated two-tier wage system.

While handing trillions to Wall Street, Obama has done nothing to create jobs or provide relief to the tens of millions of workers who are losing their jobs, livelihoods and homes. This is not a mistake, but a deliberate policy to force workers to accept ever lower wages.

Nothing can be won without an all-out fight. In 1936, rubber workers in Akron, Ohio defied wage-cutting demands and police violence by occupying the factories and bringing the operations of the industrial giants to a halt. These traditions of class struggle must be revived.

The conduct of the negotiations and the struggle must be taken out of the hands of the USW officials. Workers should elect a rank-and-file action committee consisting of the most militant and trusted workers to formulate their demands, including the restoration of all wage and benefit concessions, the abolition of the two-tier wage system, and the guarantee of a secure job and safe working conditions.

An appeal must be made to all workers—union and non-union, employed and unemployed, young and old—to bolster the picket lines and stop the strikebreaking operation in Findlay.

At the same time, the rank-and-file committee should establish lines of communication with Cooper Tire workers in Arkansas and Mississippi, as well as other rubber, auto and auto parts workers, to fight for joint demonstrations, strikes and plant occupations to defend jobs and living standards.

The production of tires is one of the most globally integrated industries, involving more than a half million

workers around the world. Under conditions where industrial workers from China to India and Europe to Latin America are coming into struggle, the nationalist and protectionist policies of the USW and other unions serve only to divide and weaken the working class. The race to the bottom can be stopped only when workers unite internationally in a common struggle against the global corporations.

The Cooper Tire struggle poses in the most acute way the question of ownership and control of industry and the financial system. Workers are confronting not simply “corporate greed,” but the failure of the capitalist system, an economic and political system based on the private ownership of the banks and corporations and the extraction of profit from the exploitation of the working class.

Private ownership must be replaced with social ownership. Only in this way can the vast productive forces of society—and the wealth created by the working class—be used to abolish poverty and end social inequality.

The stand taken by Cooper Tire workers is a sign of a growing resistance in the US and internationally. The Socialist Equality Party is spearheading the fight for the industrial and political mobilization of the working class behind the Cooper Tire workers as part of the fight for a socialist program to transform economic life to meet the needs of the vast majority, not the wealthy few.

Jerry White



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact