Cooper Tire struggle at the crossroads

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With the lockout of 1,050 workers at the Cooper Tire & Rubber factory in Findlay, Ohio entering its fourth week, the struggle has reached a decisive crossroads. The determined fight by workers against the company's wage-cutting demands must find a new way forward if it is not to be isolated by the United Steelworkers (USW) and led to defeat.

On Saturday, several hundred workers and community supporters rallied in downtown Findlay. The rally—which the USW and Ohio AFL-CIO did nothing to build—was only a pale reflection of the popular support that exists for the locked-out workers.

Dubbed "Good Jobs for Our Community," the rally was a perfunctory event, lasting forty-five minutes at most. The union officials on the platform said nothing of any substance. Instead, they made a few hollow remarks about solidarity, led chants about "lasting one day longer" than Cooper Tire, and then quickly left.

Workers were not told anything about the ongoing negotiations with the company and the federal mediator or what concessions the USW had already offered to end the lockout. Nor was anything said about the Cooper Tire workers in Texarkana, Arkansas, whose contract expires next month. The USW has rejected any joint strike action to defeat Cooper's demands.

The entire event was aimed at convincing workers of their supposed powerlessness. The best thing workers could do is docilely place their faith in the negotiating committee and a "corporate campaign" aimed at persuading Cooper Tire to be more reasonable.

"Management at Cooper Tire needs to stop holding our jobs and this community hostage, end this unfair lockout, join us at the table and bargain in good faith," said USW Secretary Treasurer Stan Johnson, who heads the union's tire industry bargaining.

After the rally, Local 207-L President Rod Nelson told the local media, "They got some new people running the company. They're going to have to learn the Cooper ways. We don't lock people out of their jobs, we work through our problems. They got to learn that, simple as that."

While trying to portray Cooper management as some "un-American" corporation, the fact is that it is doing the same thing as virtually every other corporation in the US, and for that matter, around the world. Having "worked through their problems" in 2008 with the USW—which accepted $30 million in concessions—the multinational corporation is now using the economic crisis to drastically and permanently lower the living standards of its workers.

The USW is not opposed to wage cutting in principle. On the contrary, it has repeatedly aided the corporations in driving down the wages of steel and rubber workers, and only asks that it have a "seat at the table" to do so. In this way, the dues income and other institutional interests of the upper-middle-class managers who staff the headquarters of the USW can be protected.

In his remarks, the USW Secretary Treasurer Stan Johnson assured the workers that the USW "will spend the last nickel to make sure that you succeed." In fact, the USW is holding tight to its $150 million strike fund and has not spent even one nickel to help locked-out workers who have gone more than three weeks without a paycheck. Nor has Johnson offered to sacrifice any of the $154,446 he made in salary and expenses last year or the $188,450 his boss, USW President Leo Gerard, pocketed in 2010.

By denying strike benefits, the USW is joining the effort by the corporation and the state of Ohio—which is currently blocking workers from receiving unemployment checks—to starve workers into submission. The chief concern of the USW is that this struggle does not spark a wider fight by the working class. This would upset its close financial relations with the corporations, and, above all, the campaign for the reelection of President Obama and other Democrats in 2012.

Two days after the rally, Johnson joined US Senator Bob Casey (D-Pa.) in Pittsburgh to promote the "Invest in American Jobs Act of 2011." The bill mandates that all steel, iron and manufactured goods used in the few infrastructure projects the Obama administration is

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proposing are produced in the US.

The "Buy American" chauvinism of the USW and its alliance with the Democratic Party have long been used to conceal the irreconcilable conflict between the working class and the corporate owners, and to defend the capitalist system. In the name of "national unity" and fighting foreign competitors, the USW and other unions have spent the last three decades suppressing strikes and aiding the corporations in slashing millions of jobs and destroying the gains won by American workers through generations of struggles.

In order to conceal its betrayal, the USW and its middle-class "left" supporters are claiming the struggle can be broadened through a so-called "corporate campaign."

Rather than using the methods of the class struggle—strikes, mass picketing and plant occupations—a corporate campaign uses the middle-class methods of public relations consultants. Its aim is supposedly to embarrass the corporation in the eyes of shareholders, corporate directors, consumers, bankers and creditors, the news media, ministers, regulators and politicians. This is to be accomplished through picketing shareholder meetings and distributing fliers at tire dealerships.

The number of isolated and defeated struggles in which unions employed this impotent tactic is too long to list. Some of the most prominent ones conducted by the USW include Phelps Dodge Copper (1983-86), USX Steel (1986), Ravenswood Aluminum (1991-92) and Goodyear (2006-07). In the latter case, the resulting contract sanctioned two-tier wages and other concessions, while the USW won control of a $1 billion health care trust fund.

One last word should be said about Saturday's rally. Johnson claimed that the USW was mobilizing international support, citing a statement from the union at Cooper's Melksham plant in the UK, Unite the Union. "Manufacturing is now globalised and what happens in one country can happen in another," Johnson said, "That's why Unite and our members at Cooper Tire are standing up for our US brothers and sisters."

Johnson did not bother to try to square the USW's national chauvinism—which drives a wedge between workers internationally—and its claim to be uniting workers across global borders. In fact, the "internationalism" of the USW consists in rallying union bureaucrats around the world in a common struggle against the working class.

Unite, the largest trade union in Britain, has been complicit in one betrayal after another.

Most recently it struck an agreement with British Airways giving the company two-tier wages and other concessions, while blocking any struggle by workers despite their repeated votes for industrial action. It also sabotaged struggles by Southampton municipal workers and electricians, and is preparing to cave in to the Tory government's attacks on pensioners.

There is widespread support for Cooper Tire workers throughout the US and internationally. But this support can only be mobilized if locked-out workers take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the USW. A rank-and-file committee, consisting of the most trusted and militant workers, should be elected to appeal to workers at Cooper Tire in Texarkana and throughout the rubber, steel and auto industry for a common struggle.

A serious struggle to mobilize the entire working class against the relentless assault of the corporate elite means above all a political struggle. The impotence of the USW is inextricably linked to its defense of the profit system and its alliance with the Democratic Party. However, the interests of workers Cooper Tire workers, and workers everywhere, are incompatible with the control of economic life by the corporate and financial aristocracy.

The insistence by Cooper Tire workers that they have the right to a job at a decent wage poses ever more directly the question of ownership, and the necessity for the transformation of Cooper and the entire auto industry into publicly owned enterprises, run on the basis of social need. This is the fight for socialism.

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