

US, Canadian workers locked out for opposing wage cuts

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The new year begins with major industrial lockouts in Canada and the ongoing lockout of Cooper Tire workers in Findlay, Ohio.

On New Years Day, the Electro-Motive Diesel (EMD) subsidiary of Caterpillar locked out 425 workers in London, Ontario, demanding they give up 55 percent of their wages—a reduction from \$35 to \$16.50 per hour—together with significant cuts in benefits. The same weekend, Rio Tinto Alcan locked out 750 workers at a smelter in Alma, Quebec, insisting on wage and benefit concessions and the right to subcontract.

Meanwhile, 1,050 workers in Findlay, Ohio are entering the seventh week on the picket line at Cooper Tire, which locked them out on November 28 after they rejected the company's demands for sweeping concessions on top of those given up in 2008.

Rio Tinto and Caterpillar are two of the world's largest corporations, valued in the tens of billions of dollars. They operate on every continent, exploiting labor and natural wealth to generate enormous earnings. Rio Tinto made \$7.5 billion in profits in the first half of 2011, while Caterpillar reaped \$14 billion last year. Cooper Tire is likewise a multi-national corporation, with facilities in the US, Mexico, Europe and Asia.

These lockouts are part of an intensifying corporate assault on the working class throughout North America and internationally, whose aim is the destruction of all the gains won by workers in the course of a century of bitter and bloody class struggles. This assault is fully supported by governments at every level, including the Obama administration in the US and the Conservative government of Stephen Harper in Ottawa, along with the Liberal governments of Dalton McGuinty in Ontario and Jean Charest in Quebec.

At each locked-out workplace the story is the same:

workers reject a contract demanding cuts to their incomes and the company retaliates by locking them out and bringing in or threatening to bring in scab labor. The unions (the United Steelworkers in Findlay and Quebec, the Canadian Auto Workers in Ontario) limit themselves to futile appeals to the various governments while doing their best to keep the workers isolated and powerless.

Behind the scenes, union officials are attempting to work out rotten deals that would include a substantial portion, if not all, of the companies' demands. The Steelworkers and Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) hope to push through such contracts after workers have stood in the cold for weeks or months, with only a pittance in strike pay, if that, to take home to their families.

In each case, the union ceded all the initiative to the company, refusing to call a strike and permitting the factory gates to be shut in the workers' faces.

Caterpillar's EMD subsidiary has manufacturing facilities on both sides of the US-Canadian border, only a few hundreds miles apart, yet the workers are kept entirely isolated and separated from each other by their respective unions.

The CAW preaches Canadian nationalism, telling workers to put pressure on the Harper government to investigate the 2010 sale of EMD to "US-based Caterpillar." Meanwhile, the United Auto Workers and the Steelworkers campaign for workers in the US to "buy American," even though workers in both countries build the same products.

Last year, Caterpillar's rail division opened an assembly plant in Muncie, Indiana, paying as little as \$12-14 per hour—approximately one-third the wages paid to the London, Ontario workers. Reports are circulating that if the Ontario workers do not accept the company's concession demands, Caterpillar might shut

down production in London and move the work to Indiana.

On the basis of nationalism and class collaboration, the American trade unions are helping drive down manufacturing wages in the United States to near-poverty levels. These low wages are now being used to threaten the incomes of workers in other developed countries, from Canada to Germany, Italy and France, with outsourcing. As one EMD worker in London ruefully told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “It is a race to the bottom.”

Nothing could better illustrate the need for an internationalist perspective in the fight to defend wages and living conditions. Workers must reject the chauvinist program of the trade unions and unite with their brothers and sisters across national borders to fight their common enemy: the corporations and their agents in the big business political parties.

Workers thrown into these conflicts are coming to see that their fight is not simply against one company or in one plant, but rather a much broader struggle against the existing economic and political setup. Immediately on taking a stand to defend their jobs and living standards, they are confronted with certain fundamental realities: that the various governments (Democratic, Republican, Conservative, Liberal, NDP) take their orders from the corporations; that the unions function as the policemen of the companies in imposing concessions; that workers confront a struggle against giant conglomerates that operate in many countries and pit workers in different countries against one another.

The workers need to understand that the only way to defend their livelihoods is through a resolute and implacable industrial and political struggle against capitalism. The notion, promoted by the unions and their fake-left hangers-on, that corporate greed can be fought without a struggle against the capitalist system that defends and sustains the rapacious actions of the corporate oligarchs is part of the attempt to disarm the working class.

The alternative to this state of affairs is socialism—the reorganization of economic life by the working class to meet social needs, not the profit interests of billionaires.

It is necessary to mobilize workers in every factory and workplace against wage cuts and concessions. The locked-out workers in Canada and the US should form

rank-and-file committees to lead their own struggles and coordinate with workers in other industries, regions and countries. These new organizations of struggle must be independent of the trade unions, which will do everything in their power to sabotage a mass international movement against the profit system.

The struggle of workers to defend their interests cannot be confined to their workplaces alone. Workers need their own socialist political party which has as its aim the establishment of a workers’ government to nationalize corporations such as Cooper, Caterpillar and Rio Tinto and turn them into public utilities democratically controlled by the working people and run in the interests of society as a whole.

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