

Cooper Tire workers in UK express solidarity with Ohio struggle

Richard Duckworth
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Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed information and spoke to workers at Cooper Tire's European HQ at Melksham, Wiltshire, UK on the lockout of their colleagues at the Cooper Tire plant in Ohio.

One Cooper worker pinned copies of WSWWS articles to the company sign at the factory entrance.

He and his colleagues at the Melksham plant are all too aware of the vicious measures Cooper Tire management will resort to in order to boost profits. The plant was formerly part of Avon Rubber PLC until 1997, when the tire business was acquired by Cooper Tire—leaving Avon to concentrate on its core automotive components, technical products, and protective equipment.

As one worker commented, on reading the WSWWS accounts about the Cooper lockout in Findlay, Ohio, “They treat us like dirt here, too.”

In 2009, Cooper Tire announced manufacturing “realignment” plans for the Melksham plant, some 25 miles east of Bristol in southern England, in order for the company to focus on its “strategic objective to create a sustainable and competitive cost position” and in the long term to help “mitigate the effects of the current economic downturn and increase its cost base.”

What this meant in practice was that in 2010, 20 percent of the 1,000-plus workforce were made redundant.

CEO Roy V. Armes was paid \$4.7 million last year, up from \$2.6 million in 2008. He said at the time of the redundancies at Melksham, “We understand the impact of this announcement on affected employees, their families and local communities and are committed to handling these moves with great sympathy and sensitivity.”

The local paper, the *Wiltshire Times*, noted one

worker's response: “My redundancy pay was a joke. It works out at about £1-a-day. I am going to have no money now until I get my cheque through and I have a mortgage to pay.”

Workers also complained that they had “to look on the *Wiltshire Times* web site to find out that jobs are going.”

At the time of the redundancies in 2010, one worker was quoted as saying, “The union knew nothing about it. They weren't even there for the meeting, they're never really supportive. The whole factory just stopped and downed tools.”

All the Unite union could offer in response was its “officers to negotiate with the company and the shop stewards as to what is best for workers.”

In September 2010, 500 workers at the Melksham plant refused to work overtime in a dispute over working conditions at the factory. The overtime ban was in response to the capping of sick days, fewer floating holidays, removal of Saturday night working, an increase in the retirement age, the canteen being shut down on weekends and targets on its bonus scheme made higher. As one worker said, “The action is based on the wage claim. We want a reasonable increase in the wage because of the profits they are making.”

Unite officials could yet again only enter into “dialogue with the company to try and resolve the issues that we have.”

Cooper Tire announced it would take all steps necessary to prevent disruption to production by increasing production at its other plants around the world.

WSWS reporters spoke to Andy, a Cooper Tire worker, at the gates of the Melksham plant. He said that Unite is considered to be “useless” and “having little or no power, especially compared to 20 years ago.”

“This isn’t just about British jobs, but a battle with global capitalism,” he added. He expressed his “full support” for the Cooper Tire workers locked out in the United States.

Several workers spoke of their concern over the newly acquired Cooper Tire factory in Serbia and how the company may potentially use it to attack their jobs and wages. Many expressed their support for their brothers and sisters at the Ohio plant lockout and called for them to “stay strong.”

Unite in Britain and the United Steelworkers (USW) in the US have operated jointly to isolate disputes at the Cooper Tire plants in Melksham and Findlay, Ohio. Despite being partners in “the world’s first global union, Workers Uniting,” no attempt has been made by either union to unite the struggles and disputes of all Cooper Tire workers.

On the Unite web site, Assistant General Secretary Tony Burke claims, “Manufacturing is now globalised and what happens in one country can happen in another. That’s why Unite and our members at Cooper Tire are standing up for our US brothers and sisters.”

This is so much hot air. In reality, apart from the placement of futile newspaper advertisements in US newspapers by Unite, Burke’s claims of international solidarity ring entirely hollow. As Derek explained, “We have heard a bit about the conflict in America. There are some stickers sent by the [USW] union out there but not much else is being done to help them. I really support the Cooper Tire workers and wish we could do more.

“It’s definitely them and us here too. They treat us like dirt. But it’s the same everywhere. The employers think they have the upper hand, but it can’t last much longer. Things have to change, like they are in Egypt.”



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