

Locked-out Ohio workers defy Cooper Tire as negotiations resume

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Workers in Findlay, Ohio continue to man picket lines at the Cooper Tire plant more than two months after the multi-national corporation locked out 1,051 workers for opposing its wage-cutting demands.

Seven weeks after the last negotiations, management has agreed to resume contract talks on Monday, February 6. The timing is not accidental. The company waited for the United Steelworkers union to push through a concessions contract at its other unionized plant—in Texarkana, Arkansas. From the beginning, management’s chief concern was to prevent a coordinated struggle by workers in Ohio and the 1,500 workers at the Arkansas plant who had overwhelmingly voted for strike action.

The USW ensured that would not happen. Late last month, workers in Arkansas, well aware the union would do nothing to conduct a serious fight, approved a last-minute concessions package recommended by the USW local. After the vote, the president of USW Local 752L, David Boone, praised the “professional manner” of company negotiators and claimed the agreement—which contains sweeping wage and benefit givebacks—would “keep good jobs in Texarkana.”

Having isolated the Findlay workers, the USW will now exert every form of pressure on them to bow to management’s demands, saying this is the only way to “save jobs” and prevent a plant closing.

On February 1, the company cut off health insurance to workers and their families. At the same time, the USW has offered nothing but a pittance—only a few weeks’ worth of \$100 gift cards for groceries—to workers who have gone without a paycheck for two months.

“If we get temporary coverage under COBRA (health insurance) that will cost \$800 for a family,” one worker told the WSW. “The union has said it will give us coverage—but what kind? I’m just trying to stay away from the doctor.”

The USW has solicited the support of Dennis Kucinich to help blackmail workers into submission, inviting the Democratic congressman to make an appearance at the local union hall in Findlay this Saturday.

In comments earlier this week, Kucinich praised the sellout agreement by the USW in Texarkana and welcomed the company’s decision to return to the bargaining table. These “positive developments,” he said, showed the importance of unions.

Indeed the unions are “important” for the corporations and the big business politicians because they have systematically blocked any struggle by workers against the demands of the corporations. At the same time, rather than uniting workers to defend their jobs and living standards, the USW has aided and abetted the company’s efforts to pit workers in different states against each other to see who will work for the worst wages and conditions.

In 2008, the USW helped Cooper push through \$30 million in concessions at each of the plants in Findlay and Texarkana, while it closed its plant in Albany, Georgia, with the loss of 1,400 jobs. It is once again insisting that workers sacrifice even as the company makes large profits and pays its top executives multi-million dollar bonuses.

Workers on the picket lines in Findlay expressed their determination to fight the company and defend their living standards. In discussions with reporters from the WSW they expressed support for the development of

a political movement, independent of the two big business parties, to defend the social rights of the working class.

Joe Milek, a scrap hauler with less than two years at Cooper Tire, said, “There’s no excuse for a CEO to make \$4 million while they’re paying \$13 an hour to workers. I make \$149.50 a day, with no sub pay, no pension and no regular schedule. To me, that’s Third World—it’s unacceptable. It’s like working at McDonald’s, except it’s a lot more hazardous.

“The older guys say when they first came here it was the cat’s meow—a great place to work. Not anymore. They don’t reinvest in the plant. For three weeks the trash bin wasn’t working and thousands of pounds of scrap and garbage was piling up in dumpsters outside.

“Personally, if they say they are going to close this plant if we don’t accept their demands, I say, go ahead, bulldoze it. I’m not working for a slave labor wage.

“They want to take from us so they can pay off executives like [Roy] Armes and [Chris] Ostrander. They buy a new plant in Serbia and a corporate jet, and say, ‘You, Johnny worker, we’re going to take away your livelihood to pad our salaries.’ They want you to live off of ramen noodles and macaroni and cheese.

“What they got in Texarkana was basically no different than what they tried to get us to take. They pulled out the five-tier demand but it was filled with concessions. If they try to push the same thing here, I’m going to vote it down. You can’t live on \$13 an hour with food and gas going up. The company says ‘take it or leave it’ and the union says, ‘you should be happy you have a job.’”

Another older worker said, “How far does it have to go down before people have had enough? Back in the day when union people earned enough to live the companies couldn’t just take production to another country. Now they can.

“It’s like how the United States grew from independent states into one national economy. The same thing has happened with all the world’s nations—they’ve come together into a world economy. You can’t fight just in one country anymore. We have to have a global union.

“People losing their jobs and their homes are seeing that this isn’t their own fault—it’s the system. Right

now, we’re working for two companies—Cooper Tire and the union. Behind closed doors the Democrats and Republicans are on the same team. When they come outside they say, ‘Oh, we’re all for the people.’

“The top one percent own everything and they get all the tax breaks. The government is basically turning into a dictatorship, which can have martial law anytime. What we need is a whole new way for our families—it should be like you say, a government by workers and for workers.”

Mike Fraley, with 36 years at the factory, said, “The system is broken. I’m about to retire and I’m worried about health care. Right now I would qualify for about \$1,800 a month in retirement benefits, about \$1,500 after taxes. Health care would cost me \$600 to \$700 a month, nearly half of my total income.

“It’s not easing up, it’s only getting worse. We’re being assaulted from every angle. It’s a flood of losses—higher medical costs, lower wages. It’s a lot different from the 1960s. That was hard times in the land of plenty. There’s now a plan to take everything away from the working class.

“A revolution is coming. You could see the rumblings of that with the Occupy Wall Street protests. We’re no idiots. We know why the media and the powers-that-be did not cover that—They don’t want us to know.

“The people are disenfranchised. We have no choice because both parties have the same rhetoric. The climate is ripe for change more than any other time in history. Everyone is hurting us—the unions, the elected officials, these jokers in Cooper’s top management.”



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