

Union announces tentative settlement in Cooper Tire lockout

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The United Steelworkers Workers union (USWA) has told locked out Cooper Tire workers in Findlay, Ohio that it has reached a tentative contract agreement with the multinational tire maker. The more than 1,000 workers in Findlay have been on the picket line nearly three months since decisively rejecting Cooper's last offer in November.

USWA Local 207L has not released any details of the agreement pending an informational union meeting set for Saturday morning. A vote is scheduled Monday.

The announcement of a tentative settlement comes two weeks after a union meeting at which USWA officials told Cooper workers that they might not get everything they were seeking and would have to make "tough decisions." Union officials did all they could to demoralize workers in order to prepare the way for a sellout of their struggle by making it appear nothing could be done to shift the company.

Negotiations between the USWA and the company broke off earlier in the month after management maintained its hard line. A company proposal on February 17 called for a five-year agreement. It retained the five-tier wage structure—which will result in sharp wage cuts for most workers—with slight modifications for those currently employed. It withdrew the proposal to freeze the defined pension benefit program for employees hired before January 1, 2009.

Among other concessions, the proposed contract contained a provision for a so-called student program to hire workers in certain classifications at the rate of \$13 an hour with no benefits. The modification of both the

five-tier wage and the pension freeze were contingent on an agreement being ratified by February 29.

Since the Findlay lockout began in November, the USWA has maintained the isolation of the workers. Strikebreakers have been allowed to cross the picket line while the company continues production.

In late January, the USWA pushed through a concessions contract at Cooper Tire's Texarkana, Arkansas plant. This prevented a united struggle by locked out workers in Findlay and workers in Texarkana, who had given overwhelming strike authorization.

On February 1, the company cut off health insurance for locked out workers and their families. At the same time the union has offered workers a pittance in financial support—a few weeks worth of gift cards for groceries.

Last Friday the USWA further isolated the Findlay workers by pushing through a four-year agreement at Cooper Tire's Clarksdale, Mississippi rubber mixing plant. Meanwhile, the Teamsters announced a settlement with Cooper Tire covering the Findlay plant's fleet truck drivers.

Rather than launch a genuine struggle to mobilize the working class in support of the locked out Cooper Tire workers, the unions have sought to build illusions that an unfair labor practice suit filed with the National Labor Relations Board will exert pressure on the company. Meanwhile, they have brought in a parade of Democratic politicians, such as Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich, to mouth empty phrases of support

while promoting anti-Chinese chauvinism.

The vote on the tentative agreement is set to coincide with the arrival in Findlay of a “Journey for Justice” caravan. The caravan includes a few workers locked out by American Crystal Sugar Company in the Upper Midwest, an empty gesture designed to cover up the isolation by the unions of both struggles.

Workers contacted by the WSWs expressed their lack of confidence in the USWA’s claim that it had achieved a satisfactory agreement. One worker told the WSWs that workers plan to watch the ballot boxes very carefully to make sure there are no irregularities. In addition, about 150 workers could be barred from voting because they are behind in their union dues.

Doug, a veteran Cooper Tire worker, told the WSWs, “About every contract we ever got from this union has been a sellout. They tell you it is going to be this way, and something pops up you didn’t know about. It pops up so many times it’s unreal. That’s where it gets to be a bunch of BS.”

A worker with 19 years at the plant said, “Mum’s the word around here. The union is not telling anyone anything. That tells me that the offer isn’t going to be anything more than what the company made two weeks ago on February 17. That wasn’t much different from the last, final offer from the company that we rejected.

“There was supposed to be ‘Journey for Justice’ involving locked out workers from American Crystal coming to Findlay, and a hands around the plant event on Monday. The USW International cancelled all that. What are we supposed to tell the American Crystal workers? ‘Sorry we got a deal, screw you.’?”

“It’s going to get ugly. We’re going to fight this. [USW Local 207L President] Rod Nelson got up and told us the contract wasn’t going to contain any concessions. It would be the best in history, he said.

“The International is selling us out and trying to put the fear of god in people to push this contract through.”

Another Cooper worker said, “It seems like they are trying to divide people. They have done that the last several contracts.”



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