

Union pushes concessions contract at Cooper Tire

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The United Steel Workers union representing more than 1,000 workers locked out by Cooper Tire in Findlay, Ohio has agreed to nearly all of the company's demands in a tentative contract presented to workers Saturday. The contract would also allow Cooper to victimize at least 10 workers.

The USW has scheduled a vote Monday, seeking to end a three month lockout.

"This is a sellout!" workers exclaimed as they left Saturday's meeting. "It's disgusting. It's insulting. What did we fight for?"

"Don't be fooled," said one worker. "They've dropped some words from the original contract, but this is the exact same thing we voted down in November."

The new contract includes a signing bonus of \$800, down from the \$2,500 the company offered in November. Six job types will be re-rated at a lower pay scale, and pay scales will have higher minimum quotas.

Workers said that one goal of these changes was to save the company money by driving out older workers, and replacing them with newly hired workers making \$13 per hour.

While the workers were strongly opposed to the concessions, the union's capitulation did not come as a surprise.

"I don't think it's fair," said Chico, a skilled trades worker with 25 years at the plant. "The union really could have done a better job."

"This contract is even worse than the one at Texarkana," said one worker as he left the meeting Saturday, referring to the contract agreed to by the USW at a Cooper Tire plant in Arkansas last month. The union deliberately sought to pass the contracts separately in order to keep the workers from launching a united struggle.

At Saturday's meeting, workers spoke out to

denounce the concessions contract. One worker read part of a 2008 letter to the membership from Local 207L president Rodney Nelson, which stated, "We will sit down again and negotiate a new contract in a year and a half. This will not be a concessionary contract."

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party presidential campaign for Jerry White distributed copies of a statement calling for opposition to the contract and a political struggle of the working class against the capitalist profit system. The intervention has had a significant impact.

"The World Socialist Web Site newsletters were all over the union hall," said one worker. "The officials began the meeting by saying 'don't read the socialist leaflet.' That's when people starting taking the leaflet out of their pockets and saying, 'What's on this?'"

In an email sent to members detailing the contract, the Local 207L executive board asserted that it "was the best we could do without risking further financial harm to our families, community, and our customers that we need to keep our plant thriving and prosperous."

The reference to a "thriving and prosperous" plant is intended to signal to Cooper Tire the USW's commitment to ensuring high corporate profits. Production work at the Findlay plant is on a piecework basis, with workers in the lowest pay scale (based on seniority) receiving the equivalent of \$13 per hour on average.

The main concession in the contract is the proposal to slash wages by making it easier for management to reduce pay scales. If workers do not meet 80 percent of the average output in their wage tier, they will be bumped down to a lower rate. Within five years, the minimum will be brought up to 85 percent.

"With this new contract, they expect you to make 208

tires on a shift," said one worker. "But if it is the big truck tires there is no way you are going to meet the new quotas. If you are disqualified for a job, you are at their mercy. They can put you in any job, even at the \$13 an hour rate."

In addition, the pay rates of six of the top-paying jobs in the plant will be "re-rated" downwards. Health care costs and insurance would likewise go up by hundreds of dollars, workers said.

Union officials also announced that the company would give them a list of 10 workers who would be "disciplined" for activity on the picket line. This caused an uproar at the meeting. These 10 workers will most likely be fired and denied unemployment benefits.

In another insult, union officials warned workers that the company plans to re-hire some of the scabs that were used to replace them, leading some of the more militant workers to raise concerns about their own safety.

"We've had a lot of bullying in the plant before this even happened," said one worker who has been a regular at the picket lines but requested to be quoted anonymously. "It's going to blow it full force. There's going to be violence and a hostile work environment. I can't even imagine what life is going to be like once the doors are unlocked. It's going to be ugly."

The \$800 per year signing bonus is a pittance—significantly less than the yearly growth of the cost of living.

Workers felt that, despite the union's assurances to the contrary, the passage of the contract by no means assured that the plant would stay open, or that Cooper Tire would not seek to re-open the contract.

"They say it's a five-year contract," said one worker, "but that doesn't mean they don't plan to close this plant anyway."



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