Lessons of the Cooper Tire struggle

Andre Damon
2 March 2012

On Monday, the more than 1,000 workers at Cooper Tire in Findlay, Ohio voted to accept the company's demands for wage cuts, ending a three-month-long lockout.

Since November, these workers have waged a courageous struggle against Cooper Tire, the big business politicians, the media, and their own union, to defend their right to work for a living wage. However, the United Steel Workers was able to push through a contract that vastly expands the power of management to re-rate jobs, lower wage rates and drive out older, higher paid workers, replacing them with young workers making $13 an hour.

The decision to accept this contract was not the result of lack of determination on the workers' part. Rather, it points to the fact that workers need new organizations and a new strategy to take their struggles forward.

At every point during the struggle, the workers confronted the USW not as an ally, but as an agent of management that sought to isolate, demoralize and defeat them. Although it sits on a $150 million strike fund, the USW refused to provide strike benefits to the workers, handing out only a few hundred dollars worth of gift cards for groceries.

The union deliberately kept the struggle in Findlay isolated from a separate contract negotiation with 1,500 workers at the Cooper Tire plant in Texarkana, Arkansas, passing a contract there while the workers in Findlay were still locked out.

The eagerness of the trade unions to grant concessions is not merely the result of union functionaries' perfidy and greed. It flows from their unconditional acceptance of the capitalist system.

The great challenge that workers face is that they are coming into conflict not just with one company or one corporate executive, but an entire social, economic and political system. Every struggle is the local form of a universal process. In essence, what is happening to workers in Findlay, Ohio is the same as what is happening to workers in Greece, where the bulk of the population is being driven into poverty through the dictates of the banks. The same demands are repeated in company after company, country after country.

What has taken place at Cooper Tire is part of a global struggle between two contending social forces: the bourgeoisie and the working class, each forming their response to the global crisis that has engulfed society. The ruling class has sought to utilize the crisis to restructure class relations. As far as it is concerned, a secure job at a livable income is a thing of the past, to the extent that it existed. Workers will have to settle for $13 an hour, and that will become the benchmark for even lower wages.

The unions play the role of facilitator. A section of the ruling class has made a deal with them. The union executives can maintain their bloated salaries so long as they assist the ruling class in destroying everything that had been won in the past. They prefer not to have struggles, but when one breaks out against their wishes, as in Findlay with the decision by the corporation to lock out the workers, they proceed with a method that has been honed through decades of practice: isolate the struggle while conspiring with the company to impose everything it desired in the first place.

Workers must embrace exactly the opposite program as that advanced by the unions. They must fight to unify the struggles of all working people, in every factory, state and country, in a common movement against the capitalist class and the capitalist system.

In factories and workplaces, this means throwing out the trade union agents of management, and replacing them with rank-and-file committees organized by the workers themselves to mobilize the working class against the demands of the corporations and the government.

However, strikes and militancy, while necessary, are

© World Socialist Web Site

not sufficient to counter the offensive of the ruling class. The crisis must be addressed at its root: the capitalist system, a social system based on the exploitation of the working class for profit. The alternative to capitalism is socialism. Socialism means genuine equality, on the basis of democratic control over the economy. The giant corporations must be nationalized and placed under the democratic control of the working class, to serve social need and not private profit.

The ruling class and media in the US have expended vast energy and resources seeking to convince workers that socialism is the enemy. This is because they are terrified that the perspective of socialism will once again grip the masses. And they have reason to be terrified. The power of the socialist perspective arises from the fact that it expresses the essential historical interests of the working class.

The trade unions themselves reflected this concern in the course of the Cooper Tire lockout. The growing influence of the campaign of the Socialist Equality Party was not a small factor in the union's determination to end the struggle. On the eve of the vote, they warned workers not to read the leaflets distributed by the SEP, which only increased the interest of the workers. The local media worried about the influence of "outside agitators."

The fight for socialism must be a political struggle. The ruling class has its political parties—the Democrats and Republicans, which are together spearheading this assault through high unemployment. This is the deliberate policy of the Obama administration. Earlier this week, Obama spoke before the a meeting of the United Auto Workers, with everyone cheering on the restoration of profits to the auto companies, based on a historic attack on auto workers.

The working class needs its own politics, and its own party. The Socialist Equality Party and its candidates Jerry White and Phyllis Scherrer have intervened in the 2012 elections to fight for this perspective. The aim of the campaign is not to work within the existing political system, dominated by money and corruption, but to spearhead a mass movement in opposition to it, and in opposition to the capitalist system.

We urge workers at Cooper Tire, and workers throughout the country and around the world, to support this campaign as your campaign, and to take up the fight for socialism.

For more information and to get involved visit socialequality.com

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site