

United Steelworkers seeks to push through sellout agreements at tire makers Bridgestone, Goodyear and Michelin

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Work in the tire and rubber industry? Fill out the form below to let us know what you think of the tentative agreements and the conditions at your workplace. Your name will be kept anonymous.

In recent weeks, a series of “last-minute” tentative agreements were reached between the United Steelworkers union and tire companies across the United States, averting strikes at Bridgestone, Goodyear and Michelin (maker of BFGoodrich tires in the US).

The USW announced a tentative agreement at Bridgestone on July 29, Goodyear on July 30 and Michelin on July 31. At Michelin and Goodyear, a 24-hour contract extension was imposed before an agreement was officially reached the next evening.

According to industry publication *Rubber News*, the contracts cover roughly 12,500 workers overall: 5,900 Goodyear workers at four locations in Ohio, Kansas, Virginia and North Carolina; 4,000 Bridgestone workers at six facilities in Ohio, Iowa, Illinois, Arkansas and Tennessee; and 2,500 Michelin workers at two plants in Indiana and Alabama.

As inflation continues to eat up real wages, workers in the tire and rubber industry are seeking to fight for higher pay and against an increase of up to 40 percent to health care premiums. Workers are also demanding adequate retirement benefits and major improvements to working conditions.

The USW, however, is doing everything it can to block a struggle, as exemplified by its actions at the Goodyear plant in Fayetteville, North Carolina.

Just as hundreds of workers began to file out of the plant around 6:00 p.m. on July 29, greeted by the cheers of their fellow workers who had begun the picket, USW officials arrived and declared with megaphones that the contract would be extended until the next evening. On July 30, before the 24-hour extension expired, the USW then announced that a tentative agreement with the company had been reached.

The USW’s blocking of a strike by Goodyear workers in Fayetteville is a part of the union’s national strategy to isolate and suppress the fighting power of workers across North America.

At Goodyear nationally, 98 percent of the US workforce across the four plants approved strike authorization. Well aware of the desire by workers to carry out a fight, USW Local 959 at the Fayetteville plant sent out a series of updates signaling preparations for an imminent walkout, including picketing assignments and protocols.

One worker, who participated in the picket at Goodyear Fayetteville before union representatives shut down the strike, told WRAL News that workers were fighting for “[i]nsurance and COLA. Everything is going up now, so our raises need to go up. The cost of living is going up, but our raises are staying the same. We can’t maintain our livelihood, and that’s worth fighting for.” Another worker said, “They are also trying to increase our health insurance by 40 percent.”

Workers are also concerned about the Plant Protection Clause (PPC). The PPC nominally guarantees that the company does not have the right to close the plant anytime it deems favorable for profits. Workers’ concern over plant closures is well founded. Goodyear shut down plants in Kentucky in early 2007 and Union City, Tennessee, in 2011, with 1,900 jobs cut at the Tennessee plant alone.

Since the announcement of the tentative agreements, workers have been kept almost entirely in the dark by the USW. The union has not publicly released any details on the proposed contracts and has largely kept the dates of ratification votes under wraps.

In an indication of the USW’s nervousness over the potential for opposition to its deals, Local 310 at the Bridgestone plant in Des Moines, Iowa, disabled comments on its Facebook post announcing the dates for “informational” meetings and the contract votes.

Workers can expect that these will be entirely company-friendly contracts. While the USW claims that COLA (cost-of-living allowances) are included in the Goodyear deal, there can be little doubt that they will be inadequate to make up for years of stagnating pay.

Whatever wage increases are included will hardly put a dent in workers’ increased expenses from inflation over the past year alone and will be further eaten into by rising health care

costs.

It can be certain that the agreements will give a green light to the tire giants to intensify their demands for increased productivity and worsen the already intolerable conditions workers face. In an indication of the pro-company character of the agreements, Bridgestone hailed its deal with the USW, saying it would “strengthen the global competitiveness of the company’s U.S. manufacturing facilities.”

Workers at Bridgestone, Goodyear and Michelin, like their brothers and sisters throughout the auto and auto parts industries, are determined to break out of the regime of low wages and disintegrating benefits which have been imposed by the pro-corporate unions for decades.

There is more than enough in the tire corporations’ financial coffers to satisfy the needs of the workers around the world who labor to create these profits. In 2021, Goodyear reported gross profits of \$3.79 billion, close to double its reported profits in 2020, and outpacing its profits in 2019 and 2018. These massive sums are the product of exploitation of Goodyear workers around the globe.

To prevent a betrayal and secure their interests, and not what the USW and companies claim is “affordable,” workers should move to organize rank-and-file factory committees. Such committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, will provide a means for workers to draw up a list of demands based on what they actually need and enable workers to communicate and coordinate their struggles throughout the tire and auto industries.

The determination of workers to fight back stands in stark contrast to the actions of the USW. In particular over the last decade, the USW has done everything it can to keep workers off the picket line and to ensure production continues in critical heavy industries.

In 2018, the USW pushed through a reviled contract that cut wages, job protection and safety and health benefits for 30,000 steelworkers at US Steel and (then) ArcelorMittal USA, after workers at the two steel giants had voted unanimously to strike.

This year, the USW blocked a nationwide strike of oil workers at Chevron, Shell, Marathon and BP, after USW President Tom Conway held a virtual meeting with the Biden administration days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Conway would boast that the deal was a “responsible contract” that did not add to “inflationary pressures”—in other words, keeping workers’ wage increases well below inflation.

When 500 Chevron oil refinery workers defied the USW’s deal and struck in Richmond, California, the union proceeded to isolate the walkout for two months, starving workers on inadequate strike pay, before it rammed through a deal virtually identical to the one workers initially rejected.

Adding to deepening wage cuts are the economic shocks created by the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine against Russia, disrupting already battered supply chains and leading to further rises in prices.

The Biden administration, for its part, is relying ever more heavily on the USW and other unions to enforce “labor discipline,” suppress strikes and throttle workers’ wages below inflation.

This corporatist relationship was on full display at the USW’s constitutional convention being held this week in Las Vegas, Nevada. U.S. Labor Secretary Marty Walsh addressed the union bureaucrats assembled at the convention, many of whom make six-figure salaries and are far removed from the day-to-day struggles of workers toiling in the plants. President Biden also delivered a pre-recorded address Monday. Throughout both addresses, Walsh as well as Biden reprised the White House’s oft-repeated assertion that the current administration is “the most pro-union in US history.”

The real content of this characterization is that the Biden administration is promoting the increasingly discredited AFL-CIO union apparatus, seeing it as a critical tool to suppress the class struggle at home, while hoping to use it to chain workers to the US war aims against Russia and China. Goodyear’s major clients have included the U.S. Department of Defense, with which it has held lucrative contracts for years.

While the USW will do everything within its capacity to keep workers off the picket line, tire production workers must realize that they have powerful allies across the US and around the globe. Worldwide, workers are engaged in important strikes and contract battles that are having a significant effect on the world economy, from dockworkers in the US to rail workers in the UK, to airline workers in Germany and workers and farmers in Sri Lanka.

The fight by tire production workers is objectively an international fight. With Bridgestone, Goodyear and Michelin plants spanning the globe, the nationalist program of the USW is thoroughly reactionary and bankrupt. Goodyear, one of the world’s largest tire producers, currently employs 72,000 workers in 57 facilities in 23 countries across the globe.

To fight these global corporations, workers must have an international strategy and organizations of their own.

A critical part of this struggle is the establishment of rank-and-file committees in tire plants across North America, as part of the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). This includes linking up the fight of Michelin/BFGoodrich, Bridgestone and Goodyear workers across North America, along with the auto, steel and heavy equipment manufacturing industries with whom their struggle is deeply intertwined through the global productive processes.



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