

Build the Tire Workers Rank-and-File Committee to unite against the USW sellout contract!

Tire Workers Rank-and-File Committee
26 September 2022

The following is the founding statement of the Tire Workers Rank-and-File Committee. Last month, the United Steelworkers (USW) union pushed through a concessions contract on 12,500 workers at the Bridgestone, Goodyear and BF Goodrich-Michelin facilities in the US. The USW claimed the agreement passed despite the fact that workers at the factory in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, voted it down, and workers at other facilities were skeptical of the results posted by the USW. In the aftermath of this betrayal, BF Goodrich-Michelin workers decided to form a rank-and-file committee to organize workers on the shopfloor to defend their interests. If you want more information or if you want to join the Tire Workers Rank-and-File Committee, contact us at: tireworkersrfc@gmail.com

Dear Brothers and Sisters from Fort Wayne, Indiana to Tuscaloosa, Alabama,

We, the workers of BF Goodrich-Michelin, are forming the Tire Workers Rank-and-File Committee to unite workers across the industry against the sellout contract the United Steelworkers (USW) bureaucracy is seeking to impose on us. The USW brought last-minute tentative agreements twice at each of the BFG facilities, after only giving us carefully worded day-to-day notices.

On August 31, the USW presented the tentative agreement it negotiated with management behind our backs. We could see the leadership did not negotiate in the interests of workers but in the interests of the corporations they claim to be fighting against.

What demands did they raise? For four to six weeks, all we heard was about the large absenteeism problem, as if they were company management! When the company and the union talk about the absenteeism, they don't mention the infections from COVID or how we are tearing up our bodies with overwork.

Last year, in a struggle closely connected to our own, the Dana Workers Rank-and File Committee at the auto parts supplier exposed the safety concerns in their plants. With the collaboration of the USW and United Auto Workers (UAW), workers like Danny Walters lost their lives, and others were injured at the hands of Dana management. At the neighboring plant in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, workers were gassed with a cleaner

that contains mostly ammonium chloride, a chemical known to cause shortness of breath, nausea and headaches.

We are forced to use time under the Family Medical Leave Act just to spend time with our loved ones because the company refuses to allow us to use days off. The USW sits back and agrees with the corporations when they reject our right to rest and leisure time! Just like our brothers and sisters on the railroads, we have our vacation taken away when the companies decide their profit interests are more important. At the Woodburn plant, the plant manager can give seven days' notice to cancel vacation with the blessing of labor relations and the union.

The so-called raises in this miserable offer do nothing when inflation hovers above 8 percent. Our younger brothers and sisters were moved up from \$19.43 to \$23 an hour, and the union is promoting this subsistence wage as a victory. Most of us in the plants are in levels, another word for tiers, which are widely reviled for their promotion of divisions among workers and perpetuation of low wages. Level 5 workers make \$35 an hour, Level 4 workers make \$32 an hour, Level 3 makes \$30.50, and further level below that make only \$23. Why do we as individuals have to bid to get higher pay? We are doing the same jobs for less. Why isn't everyone starting above \$35, and why is the USW not fighting for us?

To make sure that BFG-Michelin keeps profits rolling in, they browbeat our coworkers with a lump sum bonus of \$2,080. This inadequate amount will have 1.4 to 2.8 percent taken out for the union and a significant amount for taxes. This will do nothing to make up for the losses we have all incurred from inflation, not to mention the decades of stagnant wages enshrined in every contract that the union and corporations have pushed through!

During the first COVID-19 shutdown, workers were brought in only a week later with hazard pay. The hazard to workers' health and lives was justified by the union and companies because BF Goodrich-Michelin is contracted with the military. Later, in February of this year, USW President Tom Conway announced a deal to suppress an oil workers strike days after meeting with President Biden, Energy Secretary Jennifer

Granholm and Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks.

A national strike of oil workers would have shut down two-thirds of the refinery capacity in the US, but the USW refused to call it and caved into the demands of the corporate ruling class. Just last week two young workers, members of the USW, were killed at the BP refinery in Toledo, Ohio because of unsafe conditions. The union is not leading a struggle against the companies but working for them by keeping our power as workers divided. If we knew the oil workers were on strike, we would have proudly joined them.

At the Tenneco auto parts plant in Van Wert, Ohio, workers overwhelmingly voted to authorize strike action. A letter was released by the local union president, telling the workers that USW International President Tom Conway, the USW district director and a USW attorney intervened to prevent a strike, citing the money the company would lose. He wrote: "At 10:15 PM I received a call from what I believe to be the same group of union leadership and they informed me they had talked to the company and the company doesn't have any more to give. They said the company informed them they will lose customers if we strike and they will close the plant." Far from opposing this corporate blackmail, the USW used it against rank-and-file workers!

In 1997, when we voted down 12-hour days, the USW brought in US marshals to intimidate us to vote for the contract. This is just one example of the way the union works not to defend but suppress our democratic rights. To put up any fight we have to recognize our enemies are not only management but the union apparatus. If these contracts really represented the interests of workers, why would they hire US marshals to be present at the vote to suppress any opposition? Why does the union consistently block our right as rank-and-file workers to transparency during negotiations and to see the full contract before it is pushed through?

The USW has shown that they work for the corporations. The organization is not able to fight for our interests anymore and is run by a bought-and-paid-for bureaucracy, with top officials like Conway raking in \$200,000 in salary plus perks, which come from our exploitation and dues. In order to fight for our interests, we need to realize the time has come for us to build our own rank and file-run organizations, where we make the decisions on our pay, retirement and our health and safety conditions.

Unlike the USW, which works to divide workers and weaken the strength of our collective labor power, we need to build new organizations that can unite us. Materials like the rubber, synthetic rubber and carbon black are shipped by rail and used in industries like auto. Inspired by our brothers and sisters in rail, auto, health care, education and elsewhere, we call on other tire workers to expand the rank-and-file committee to take the fight out of the hands of the union apparatus.

We demand:

- **Oversight of ballots and democratic discussion of**

contracts. We only saw the bare "highlights" of the contract before we voted on it. Our plants were isolated, and we were told the other plants would vote in favor of the contract. Despite the number of workers that opposed the contract in Tuscaloosa, it passed, overriding the no vote in Fort Wayne. We will not accept the union's vote tallies at face value and demand an audit of the ballot counts, overseen by workers from the shop floor.

- **Bring up all workers to top pay and raise the starting wage to \$50 an hour.** \$23-35 is not enough! We should not be competing with one another for top pay. All workers should start at \$50 an hour and uncap COLA. We demand back pay for all concessions taken in previous contracts, including time working without protection from COVID-19. Abolish the "levels" at reestablish the principle of equal pay for equal work.

- **Workers' control of health & safety.** Whether it is in Tuscaloosa, Fort Wayne or nonunion plants in South Carolina, our jobs are demanding and dangerous. The USW is known for being in the most dangerous facilities, collaborating with the companies to make sure we keep working regardless of injury and death. When workers are injured, infected with COVID or monkeypox, the rank-and-file committee calls for shutting down of production until the plant is safe to work in. Workers who are injured or infected have the right to full pay and benefits for their treatments and income for their families.

- **Open the books of the union.** When we expected to strike, some of our local officials claimed we would only receive \$100 a week after a month of being on the picket lines, effectively starving us into submission. There's more than a half million dollars in some locals' accounts. Where are our dues going? We demand full pay while on strike and control of the strike fund.

If you agree with these demands, contact the Tire Workers Rank-and-File Committee. We're in a powerful position in the global supply chain, and we can only mobilize that power through the building of new forms of workers' power, the rank-and-file committees. There is ample money to meet all our demands, but the USW and other unions will not fight for us. Bridgestone made \$1.54 billion last year. That came from our labor.

It is high time we open up lines of communication with our brothers and sisters around the country and internationally and fight for a broader struggle for what we need, not what the corporations and unions say is "affordable"!



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact