

Arkansas Cooper Tire local ratifies contract

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The sellout contract orchestrated between Cooper Tire and the United Steelworkers (USW) union in Texarkana, Arkansas was ratified yesterday, leaving 1,050 locked-out workers in Findlay, Ohio isolated.

From what was a powerful position to unite Cooper Tire workers from both plants in a struggle against the company's determination to impose concessions, the future of the struggle of the Findlay workers has been made more problematic.

USW Local 752L refused to release details of the proposed contract until the after the vote, but meanwhile participated in a media whitewashing of Cooper's duplicitous attitude towards their employees. President David Boone issued a public statement before the vote, saying, "Of all the negotiations I have been involved with, this one was conducted in the most professional manner. The local community should be proud of the negotiation teams that worked to keep good jobs in Texarkana."

These words deserve to come back to haunt Boone.

In 2008, using the excuse of a dire economy, the company forced the local to reopen their contract to impose pay cuts and concessions in benefits. Cooper used the threat of plant closures to bludgeon back opposition at all the plants before finally closing the non-union plant in Georgia. As the last contract approached expiration, workers at the Texarkana plant, anticipating a struggle against takeaways, voted last October to authorize strike action.

The company had reason to be intimidated and it relied on the treachery of the USW to defuse the situation. As the company was accusing the union in Findlay of seeking to use the timing of the contract in Texarkana to threaten Cooper with both plants being out, Local 752L in Texarkana worked hand in glove with management to publicly hype the negotiations as the pinnacle of reason and understanding.

In order to push the deal through in Arkansas, Cooper

removed the demand for the five-tier wages overhaul that was rejected in Findlay. As a sweetener, a one-time \$1,200/year increase in wages was part of the package. The four-year contract was approved overwhelmingly, with 1,006 voting for and only 141 voting against.

It is now almost two full months since the workforce at Findlay was locked out after voting down a concessions contract. Replacement workers were hired and product is being moved out of the plant under round-the-clock video surveillance and intimidation against picketing workers.

USW Local 207L in Findlay, as well as the international union, have done virtually nothing to lead a serious struggle against the scabbing. At a perfunctory rally held last month, USW spokesmen claimed to be mobilizing support of a sister plant in Melksham, UK, organized under the union Unite. This consisted in nothing more than producing a letter from Unite bureaucrats. (See WSWs report on the rally and our report from Melksham.)

Jill Trautwein, a locked-out worker in Findlay, spoke to the WSWs about her own experiences after hearing of the settlement in Arkansas. "The whole situation just has me irked," she said. "We were offered a signing bonus as well, but when it was figured over a yearly basis, it was just nickels and dimes.

"Cooper Tire is the only company I've ever worked for where everyone wasn't paid the same amount.

"I turned in a budget to the union about what we new-hires made. It had my pay information, which is pretty much the same as all new-hires—\$13 an hour. That paperwork made it all the way to the company's head of human resources. All she could say was that 'I know it's rough.' Unless they have tried to live on what I manage to live on, they don't know at all what it's like.

"The biggest thing for me is insurance. I have to pay \$7,000 out of pocket before full coverage kicks in. And

my daughter got sick this year and I had to pay thousands of dollars. I don't want anybody else to have that same insurance.

“This is my first union I've ever worked for. The job I had before this one I was making better pay, better insurance, better everything, through a Japanese company. I got blindly laid off from that company, just because the industry wasn't there for auto. I made parts for Honda, Suzuki and Toyota.

“So I thought unions would be different from what they are, but they're not. I am still trying to learn how a union works. I've been in one for almost two years now and I don't understand the ins and outs or why decisions are made the way they are. I'm trying.

“Really in the job market right now, there's not a whole lot to choose from. I choose to stick with USW because I'm established in this plant. But if we do sign a contract for three years, I am going to explore my options during the next three years. I have kids who depend on me to not have this happen.

“I went into Cooper Tire thinking this is it—a great company, a great job. In times like now I don't know if any company is ever going to be like that ever again. My kids will never work for a place like this.

“That's why I chose to vote no and I will continue to choose to vote no. I was raised to take care of the person next to me.

“Like I said when you guys were out on the picket line, I do believe there has to be line drawn in the sand. It's not just happening in the US, it's happening all over the world. I hope some day it changes, but I hope it does before I die.”



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