

The unions and the lockouts at Cooper Tire and Caterpillar

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As the lockouts of workers at Cooper Tire in Findlay, Ohio and Caterpillar's Electro-Motive Diesel plant in London, Ontario enter their ninth and fourth weeks, respectively, the unions involved are working deliberately to isolate the struggles and ensure defeat.

In the US, the United Steel Workers (USW) reached a tentative four-year agreement covering the 1,500 workers at the Cooper Tire plant in Texarkana, Arkansas over the weekend. The move, hailed by the company, is aimed at preventing any unified struggle of the workers at Cooper's two main US plants.

Confident in its ability to crush the Findlay workers with the help of the USW, Cooper announced that it is beginning to ship out equipment from the Ohio plant, an initial step toward shutting it down altogether.

The 1,050 Findlay workers were locked out November 28 after they rejected massive concessions. They have been strung out by the union without strike pay, subsisting on meager food card rations.

David Boone, president of the USW local in Arkansas, heaped praise on Cooper, declaring that negotiations were "conducted in the most professional manner" and that the agreement is one that "the community can be proud of." Details of the contract have not been released and the union is hoping to force it through in a vote on Thursday. But any agreement that further isolates the Findlay workers can only pave the way for the destruction of the wages and conditions of workers at the Texarkana plant.

In London, Ontario, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) organized a rally over the weekend that served only to demonstrate the CAW's opposition to any serious struggle against the demands of Electro-Motive, a subsidiary of Caterpillar, for wage cuts of more than 50 percent.

The widespread community support for the locked-out Canadian workers, and the desire of

workers to fight, stood in sharp contrast to the CAW's bankrupt appeals to government officials who are overseeing the attack on the working class, including Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper. CAW officials made clear that they were eager to "come back to the bargaining table" to negotiate concessions.

Paralleling the American nationalism promoted by the USW and the United Auto Workers, the CAW officials wrapped themselves in the Canadian flag and presented the issue as one of defending "Canadian jobs" against an American corporation. The aim is to subordinate workers to the government and corporate elite in Canada and prevent any unified struggle with workers across the border.

The actions of the USW and the CAW are expressions of a universal process. The official unions—in the US, Canada and internationally—have long since ceased to function as organizations that defend the interests of the working class.

Under conditions of a deepening economic crisis and a massive corporate offensive against the working class, the unions have deliberately ceded the initiative to the bosses, refusing to take even the elementary step of calling strikes against wage-cutting. As a result, companies are with ever greater frequency responding to resistance from workers by carrying out lockouts.

In addition to Findlay and London, lockouts in North America are underway against Rio Tinto workers in Quebec and American Crystal sugar workers in Minnesota, North Dakota, and Iowa. Commenting on this phenomenon, an article in the *New York Times* on Monday notes, "The number of strikes has declined to just one-sixth the annual level of two decades ago."

The *Times* attributes this extraordinary fact not to the treachery of the union leadership, but to declining union membership rolls (for which it provides no explanation). It goes on to assert that "many workers

worry that if they strike they will lose pay and might also lose their jobs to permanent replacement workers”—essentially blaming the workers themselves for the virtual disappearance of strikes.

There is no absence of a will to fight among the workers. The principal factor in the decline of strikes is the integration of the unions into corporate management. The unions have developed economic and institutional interests that are tied directly to increasing the profitability of the companies and driving down the wages and conditions of the workers. Both the USW and the CAW agree that their own members must be forced to accept lower wages and benefits and harsher working conditions in order to make the companies more “competitive.”

The role of the unions is bound up with their absolute support for the capitalist profit system, a fact that was stressed by Leo Gerard, the USW president, in a recent column published in the *Huffington Post*. After a few paragraphs of empty blather about the greed of corporate CEOs, including at Cooper Tire, Gerard hastened to insist, “This isn’t a criticism of free enterprise or capitalism.”

The deepening of the capitalist crisis in 2012 will provide no shortage of class battles all over the world. The struggle of different sections of the working class, however, can be successful only in so far as these struggles are united on the basis of a common program—one that transcends the boundaries of different corporations and different countries.

At the same time, the efforts of the working class to defend itself against the assault on its jobs and wages, and on all its basic social rights, brings it into direct conflict with the profit system, which is based on the subordination of all social needs to the enrichment of a tiny elite of capitalist owners and speculators.

The only alternative for the working class is to mobilize its massive industrial and social power to break the grip of the corporate-financial elite over economic and political life. The banks and corporations must be taken out of private hands, nationalized and turned into democratically controlled public entities. For this struggle, the existing trade unions are not only worthless, they are positively harmful.

Workers must break free of these labor syndicates and build new, genuinely democratic rank-and-file organizations of struggle to organize strikes,

demonstrations, factory occupations and other forms of collective resistance, linked to the building of a mass socialist movement to fight for workers’ power.

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