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Cooper Tire standoff: No progress seen

By LOU WILIN

STAFF WRITER

Cooper Tire's labor negotiations with Findlay workers seem stunted. What's more, Cooper seems to be in less of a rush to meet than the unionized Findlay workers.

In the backdrop are Cooper's ongoing labor negotiations in Texarkana, Ark., and the beckoning of cheap labor overseas.

It's been three weeks since leaders of the company and unionized workers held labor talks. Their next meeting has not been set.

"We had a tentative date. They actually refused to meet with us," United Steelworkers Local 207L President Rod Nelson said Thursday. "I am very disappointed."

The company gave a different version.

"We did not cancel any negotiation sessions for the 12th or any day next week," said Cooper Tire Media Relations Manager Michelle Zeisloft.

More than 1,000 unionized Findlay workers have been locked out by the company since Nov. 28, the day after they rejected a proposed labor agreement. The company is using temporary workers to produce tires.

Negotiations in Texarkana are a factor in negotiations at the Findlay plant, said William E. Hannum III, managing partner for Schwartz Hannum of Andover, Mass., which represents companies in labor negotiations. Cooper's labor contract with unionized workers in Texarkana will expire Jan. 20.

Cooper Tire leaders could be afraid that a deal at one plant "could box them in" at the other factory, Hannum said.

"The fact that so many weeks have passed and the company seems pretty dug into their position, with the other plant's contract about to expire, that would cause the situation in Findlay to drag on," he said.

Anxiety seems to be growing about the lack of progress in negotiations and Cooper's staunch adherence to its "last, best and final proposal."

U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown talked of brainstorming with union workers Monday when he met them. He also cited the threat of jobs being shipped overseas, and deplored it.

State Rep. Robert Sprague, R-Findlay, said he has told company executives how much Ohio wants to keep the plant. Gov. John Kasich also has approached Cooper, trying to find solutions to keep Cooper's Findlay plant open, Sprague said.

"It may be that Cooper has some real serious financial issues," Hannum said. The serious financial issues may be in the future, not the present, he said. It may be that Cooper fears it will not be competitive if it gives in to union demands, he said.

"Cooper sounds like it's pretty serious," Hannum said.

Because Cooper already has publicly stated negotiations are at an impasse, meeting with Findlay workers may be contrary to its strategy from a legal and negotiating perspective, Hannum said.

The union, on the other hand, probably wants to chip away at the idea of an impasse and wants Cooper to concede on more of its points, Hannum said. But it sounds like an uphill battle for the union, he said.

"It sounds like the union will have to come close to Cooper's last, best and final offer for Cooper to be willing to meet," he said.

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