

US steelworkers union prepares betrayal of refinery workers

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27 March 2012

Last week, workers at Tesoro's refinery in Anacortes, Washington voted overwhelmingly to authorize their union, the United Steel Workers (USW), to strike. They were preceded by the refinery workers in Martinez, CA who authorized a strike on March 5. So far these are the only two refineries to authorize a strike, but three additional refineries in Hawaii, North Dakota, and Utah also rejected the contract offered by Tesoro last month.

The offer included a provision that would allow Tesoro to unilaterally reduce their workers' benefits and pensions. In addition there are still unresolved safety concerns following an explosion at the Anacortes Refinery in April 2010 that resulted in the deaths of seven workers.

Six months after that explosion Tesoro eliminated life insurance, dental, and medical coverage for retirees over the age of 65 by 2014. According to a USW press release, the union has limited itself to fighting these cuts through "the filing of unfair labor practice charges."

Although the contracts at these five refineries only expired on January 31, the USW has already shown every intention of keeping any potential strike isolated and unsupported. The same day that Tesoro's contract with the USW expired, the union reached a national agreement with Shell Oil for its workers at 69 refineries, and Lynne Hancock, the USW's national spokeswoman, rushed to assure Shell that there was no chance that any strike among Tesoro workers would spread to other operations.

To reinforce their point, the USW stopped their informational picket of Tesoro's Mandan, North Dakota refinery, saying that the Shell agreement would serve as a model for negotiations with Tesoro, according to the *Bismarck Tribune*.

Even more damningly, the USW accepted a separate

contract for Tesoro's refinery in Kapolei, Hawaii, within two days of the Anacortes workers authorizing a strike. Tesoro had announced in January that it was selling that facility and the USW approved the undisclosed contract "so Tesoro could find a buyer," according to Hancock. Although the USW claimed that Hawaii was a special case, their actions demonstrate that the union is more concerned with maintaining corporate profits than employee benefits.

In working with Tesoro against a united struggle of its own members, the USW is reprising the role they played in the betrayal of the Cooper Tire workers in Findlay, Ohio which ended last month. In the middle of that three-month lockout the USW negotiated a separate concessions contract for the workers at the Cooper Tire plant in Texarkana, instead of combining their struggles.

Four out of Tesoro's seven refineries are currently working without a contract, and a fifth refinery in Wilmington, CA, has a contract that expires April 30, leaving Tesoro in a precarious position. While the USW strategy is conciliatory, Tesoro's is anything but. A spokeswoman for the company threatened to run the refineries with their non-union employees and strikebreakers in the event of a strike.

Tesoro made net profits in 2011 of \$546 million. The company, like many others, is seeking to take advantage of the current economic crisis to demand concessions from its workers.



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