

# Steelworkers union undermines Northern California refinery workers strike

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For the second time since the beginning of March, refinery workers at Tesoro's Golden Eagle Refinery in Martinez, California have voted to authorize a strike. Since the first strike authorization, however, the United Steelworkers (USW) has worked hard to isolate the refinery workers. The Golden Eagle is Tesoro's largest refinery, capable of processing 166,000 barrels per day.

On January 31, the USW had negotiated a nationwide contract with Shell that set the standard for contracts with other refineries. The details were still subject to modification and ratification by the different companies and union locals, which led to protracted negotiations with Tesoro.

Following an explosion at Tesoro's Anacortes, Washington refinery that killed seven workers, Tesoro attempted to recoup its losses by changing the terms of employee benefits. In negotiations, Tesoro's demands for cuts ran up against the workers' demands for improved safety. Neither the USW nor Tesoro have made public the details of their talks.

When the Golden Eagle workers first authorized a strike on March 5, five of Tesoro's seven refineries had been out of contract since January 31, and the contract for workers at a sixth refinery in Wilmington, California was running out at the end of April. Tesoro's seventh refinery, in Alaska, is non-union.

Within two days of a second strike vote at the Anacortes refinery on March 19, the USW negotiated a separate contract with Tesoro for their refinery in Hawaii, calling it a "special case." Tesoro had announced its plans to sell the refinery and the USW told its members that it was crucial to negotiate a separate contract to ensure that Tesoro could find a buyer.

Far from being a special case, the USW has repeated their strategy of opposing a united struggle in refinery

after refinery. After Hawaii, refineries in Anacortes, in Salt Lake City, Utah and Mandan, North Dakota all negotiated separate contracts. Following the Golden Eagle workers' second strike authorization, the Wilmington local authorized a separate contract leaving the workers in Martinez completely isolated.

Since the beginning, the United Steel Workers has explicitly rejected any possibility of an industry-wide strike to enforce their contract. From the beginning of negotiations with Tesoro, USW spokeswoman Lynne Hancock assured Shell and other refiners that there was no potential for a Tesoro strike to spread. As workers in other isolated refineries continue to negotiate, the USW continues to reject any suggestion of solidarity among the workers.

In Lima, Ohio, 230 workers at Husky Energy's 155,000 barrel per day refinery struck on May 25, but Ms. Hancock was on hand to assure the oil industry that "This strike is over local issues," according to Reuters. Managers in Lima are continuing to run the refinery while the workers strike.

The implications of the contract negotiations go far beyond any local concerns. The news of a potential strike at the Golden Eagle refinery, combined with scheduled maintenance at several other refineries on the West Coast, put the highest premiums on a variety of petroleum products trading in Los Angeles and San Francisco. The strike in Ohio has had a less pronounced but still significant effect on spot prices for Midwest conventional gasoline.

A strike of even modest length and breadth in the refining industry would affect gas prices across the nation and could send ripples through the global economy. The international implications of any coordinated strike would quickly undermine the USW's chauvinist demands for trade protection and

their support for Barack Obama.

Earlier this month, the USW openly declared its defense of corporate profits and declared: “Congress needs to follow President Obama’s lead in creating jobs.” The specific measures the USW endorses are new tax credits for corporations that create jobs. What jobs the USW hopes will be created can be readily seen by their recent sellout of Cooper Tire workers in Findlay, Ohio.

The Findlay workers were locked out by Cooper Tire for three months before a concession contract was pushed through slashing wages for new hires. Every step of the way the USW undermined their members’ struggle, including negotiating a separate contract for workers at Cooper Tire’s Texarkana, Arkansas plant while the Findlay workers were still locked out.



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