

As walkout spreads to Indiana, Ohio BP refineries

White House urges USW to strangle oil workers' strike

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Workers at two of the largest oil refineries in the Midwest United States are scheduled to join the weeklong oil workers strike on Saturday at midnight. More than 1,000 workers at BP Whiting Refinery, near Hammond, Indiana, and another 600 at a Toledo, Ohio refinery owned jointly by BP and Husky, will join the walkout by 3,800 workers at nine of the 65 refineries across the US organized by the United Steelworkers (USW).

Among rank-and-file workers there is support for an all out national strike by the 30,000 workers covered by the national labor agreement. The USW has sought to contain this opposition but the oil companies have not given union officials anything they could sell to their members as a concession. On Thursday, union officials rejected the sixth proposal from Royal Dutch Shell, which is the lead bargainer for BP, ExxonMobil, Chevron and other oil giants, and talks on a new three-year agreement have been suspended until next week.

Like workers throughout the rest of the economy, oil workers are seeking to recoup lost wages, lower out-of-pocket health care costs, shorten their hours of labor and improve working conditions. The oil conglomerates, which have spent billions on dividends and stock buybacks to enrich their investors and corporate executives, have pointed to the fall in crude oil prices to oppose any improvement in workers' living standards and expand the use of lower-paid, part-time and temporary workers. Earlier this month, BP froze pay for all non-union employees company-wide.

BP management responded provocatively to the strike notice, saying, "We are committed to ensuring a safe and orderly transition as USW employees choose to strike and trained replacement workers take their

place," Scott Dean, a spokesman for BP, said by e-mail Friday. "BP has trained replacement workers comprised primarily of current and former BP employees to safely and compliantly operate the refinery for the duration of this strike."

The Whiting refinery, BP's largest, produces gasoline for much of the Midwest, as well as aviation fuel, kerosene, propane and more than eight percent of the country's asphalt. The Toledo facility processes 160,000 barrels of oil daily, including from the tar sands of Alberta, Canada.

On Thursday the Obama White House weighed in calling for a quick end to the strike. In a statement, the president's deputy press secretary Frank Benenati wrote, "We are monitoring the situation and urge labor and management to resolve their differences using the time-tested process of collective bargaining."

To this point, the partial strike has had limited economic impact, with about 13 percent of the nation's refining capacity affected with the two BP refineries added. The Obama administration, however, is concerned that the USW could lose control and the struggle could inspire other sections of workers into action against decades of falling living standards.

In recent months, various think tanks have warned of the danger of a "wages push" by American workers who have suffered the longest period of wage stagnation since the Great Depression even as corporate profits and the stock market have soared. (See: "The Coming Fight Over Wages in the US").

Despite Obama's rhetoric about "inclusive prosperity" and "middle class economics," the administration's economic policy has been based on an unrelenting campaign to drive down wages and shift

health care costs from corporations to the backs of workers.

And like his Republican predecessor, Obama is no less a stooge of Big Oil. This was shown in his kid gloves treatment of BP after the Gulf oil spill and the decision by the US Justice Department last year to drop charges against Tesoro whose criminal disregard for the safety led to the explosion which killed seven Tesoro workers in Anacortes, Washington, in 2010.

What does the White House mean about using the “time-tested process of collective bargaining” to resolve the issues in the strike?

The president is well aware that the trade unions are committed, just as much as the oil companies, to boost the profits and competitiveness of American capitalism at the expense of the working class. He is concerned that the intransigence of the oil giants and any effort to impose their demands without the assistance of the unions could provoke an explosive response by workers.

Since taking office, the Obama administration has relied on the unions to suppress the opposition of the working class to the greatest transfer of wealth from the bottom to top in American history. This includes the help of the United Auto Workers in cutting labor costs in the auto industry by nearly 35 percent. This is why Obama appointed USW President Leo Gerard to his Advanced Manufacturing Partnership (AMP) Steering Committee where he works with corporate executives from Dow Chemical, Alcoa, Caterpillar and other Fortune 500 companies to slash labor costs in the name of boosting their “international competitiveness.”

Meanwhile Gerard & Co. spread the poison of economic nationalism, claiming that the loss of jobs and declining living standards in America are caused by “currency manipulation” by Japan and China, not the capitalist profit system. This only serves to divide and weaken workers in the face of the attack by global corporations like BP, Shell and Exxon Mobil, while lining up American workers for another war.

The USW presents Obama as “pro-worker” and invited Democratic congressmen Gene Green and Al Green to lead the singing of “We Shall Overcome” at Friday’s rally at Shell’s Houston headquarters. But if oil workers were to break the restraints of the USW and shut down the oil industry, Obama and the Democrats would prove to be their enemies no less than the

Republicans. In the event of such a struggle, these erstwhile “friends of labor” would use anti-strike laws, mobilize the police and National Guard to escort scabs through the picket lines and arrest strikers in the name of defending “national security.”

In the face of this anti-working class gang-up, the USW is trying to silence strikers and “control the message” by claiming that the strike is over safety not wages. For workers it is not an “either/or” issue. Workers have the right to improved living standards *and* a safe job! The claim that multi-billion corporations cannot afford both is a fraud.

Oil workers must break out of the straitjacket being imposed by the USW, spread the strike throughout the entire industry and fight for the mobilization of the widest sections of the working class in a common struggle to defend jobs and living standards. To do this, rank-and-file strike committees, made up of the most class-conscious and militant workers, should be organized, independently of the USW and both big business parties.

We urge oil workers to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* here to take up this fight.



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