

“If we all took a stand together we would be stronger”

Striking US oil refinery workers speak out

Our reporters
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The number of workers participating in the ongoing US oil refinery strike grew to 5,400 as employees at BP's refineries in Whiting, Indiana and Oregon, Ohio walked out Sunday. The United Steelworkers (USWA) union called a partial strike on February 1 after rejecting proposals from Royal Dutch Shell, which is the lead bargainer for the major oil companies.

World Socialist Web Site reporting teams visited picket lines across the United States over the weekend. The situation is tense on picket lines across the country, as the oil companies attempted to maintain production using non-striking personnel. Workers spoke to WSWs reporters despite the attempt by the USWA to enforce a gag order to keep workers from speaking to the press.

WSWS reporters received a warm response from pickets at the BP Husky refinery in Oregon, Ohio, outside of Toledo, which had been struck by the United Steelworkers Sunday morning as part of a limited expansion of the selective strike.

Workers said the company was attempting to continue production at the refinery using supervisory personnel. As one striking worker put it, “The guys they have in there running it have about 15 minutes of training. When they start it back up it is going to be dangerous. We are not baking cookies.”

The USWA has called out only a small portion of its 30,000 members on strike, a policy which many workers denounced. One veteran worker declared, “We need to stick together. If we all took a stand together we would be stronger.”

He noted that the USWA had chosen that BP-Husky refinery to target for a selective strike even though it was only running at one-half capacity. “We are hardly a pimple. The heart of the refinery is down. It has been down a couple of weeks. They are having a hard time making gasoline.”

While workers noted that health and safety was a factor in the strike, they also pointed to a multitude of other concerns. Remarking on the two-tier wage that had been imposed on auto workers during the 2008 auto restructuring, one picketer said, “They want to two-tier our workers just like they did at [Chrysler] Jeep here in Toledo. They want to do it in the warehouse, but it will spread throughout the company.”

Jason, a worker with 7 years experience, noted that in the years since he worked at BP-Husky there had been a number of takeaways imposed, particularly in the area of health care. “When I got in they paid health care for retirees. That has been taken away.

“When you work half your life for a company you should get a pension where you can afford to live comfortably.

“You are overworked and can't keep your eyes on everything. Some of the units have been overlooked as far as maintenance.” He said that the refinery was supposed to implement scheduled downtime, known as a “turnaround” every four years, but the last one was in 2007. “We are constantly putting on band-aids,” he said.

“Across the industry they are using contractors to take jobs away.” Citing one example he said, “They want to get rid of quality control and put in chemist contractors. Meanwhile, they are making profits hand over fist.”

Northern California

A WSWs reporting team visited the picket line at the Tesoro Golden Eagle Refinery in Martinez, California

north of Oakland. It had about 75 people, with contingents from the Shell and Chevron refineries in Northern California. Security guards inside the gate were constantly watching and filming the pickets.

While WSWS reporters were on the picket line a big rig crossed the picket line. A picket captain reported to the WSWS, “Last night a pickup truck actually hit two picketers, sending one to the hospital to get checked for a concussion. Thankfully they weren’t hit too bad.”

“Safety at this refinery isn’t very good,” said Howard, another picket captain who had worked there since 1973. “In ’99 we had a fire that killed four and disabled a few more.

“We’ve also been hit by the last few contracts. All our raises have been eaten up by increased medical costs and two years ago they dumped our defined benefit retirements for defined contributions.

“That really hit the people who were about halfway through their careers,” he said. “I’ve got a lot of sympathy for those workers in Detroit who had their pensions cut in the bankruptcy. It’s not right to cut into the retirements they already paid for.”

Marathon Galveston Bay refinery. “Last time, we got a 2.4 percent wage increase, but our health care costs went up by 4 percent! No matter what happens, the company always seems to come out on top. It shouldn’t be that way. Is that too wrong to ask?” He also pointed out that Marathon and other companies had begun to roll back employee health care plans due to the expansion of Obama’s Affordable Care Act.

Workers also said that the strike points to broader issues in American society. “If you work for a living and you think the government represents you, you’re deluded,” said another worker at Marathon Galveston Bay refinery. “Big business, politicians, these guys are all buddies. They all grew up in the same rich neighborhoods, went to the same schools. They’re an unofficial aristocracy.”



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Houston, Texas

WSWS reporters spoke to striking workers at several plants in the greater Houston area. Citing a Texas state law, union officials only stationed two pickets per gate. There was a heavy police presence, with squad cars patrolling the perimeters of the plants.

One worker pointed across the road at the LyondellBasell Houston area refinery, saying, “you see that red car over there? That’s a private investigator hired by the company. There are probably others, but we haven’t spotted them yet.”

At the Shell Deer Park refinery picketers spoke in opposition to the selective strike policy and in support of a nationwide strike. “If Shell doesn’t sign an agreement soon,” one worker exclaimed, “[their refineries] will be dropping like flies!”

Despite the attempt by the USWA to bar discussion of wages, workers spoke out on the issue. “Over the last 19 years, every time our pay goes up so does our cost of living,” a worker said on a picket line at