

Oil workers remain determined as USW resumes talks to sell out strike

E.P. Bannon
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Negotiators for Royal Dutch Shell and the United Steelworkers (USW) will resume talks today at the oil giant's Houston headquarters as the partial strike by oil workers—now involving 5,400 workers in Texas, California, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky and Washington state—enters its tenth day. The resumption of negotiations comes days after the Obama administration said it was “monitoring the situation carefully” and urged the parties to negotiate a quick end to the strike.

The USW has deliberately kept workers in the dark about the details of the negotiations, even though it was forced to reject six offers made by Shell on behalf of the industry. By continuing the backroom talks USW officials hope Shell will give them some superficial concession to help ram through another sellout deal, which will inevitably be called a “victory.” The problem so far, however, is that the oil giants have been completely intransigent and are seeking even greater cuts in labor costs.

USW executives, well aware of the growing mass anger within the working class over decades of declining living standards, have made a tremendous effort to isolate the strike and restrict demands solely to safety concerns.

“Tensions are high at this point but we’re trying to tell everybody stay motivated, stay calm, we will reach a solution to get a settlement that will address our health and safety issues,” USW spokeswoman Lynn Hancock stated on Monday.

While the safety records of the oil giants are beyond abysmal, the USW has been complicit in endangering the workers it claims to represent. In the name of boosting the “competitiveness” of the oil companies the USW has sanctioned years of layoffs, the erosion of working conditions and other cost-cutting measures.

For its part, the Obama administration—which the union presents as a champion of working people—has functioned as a stooge for Big Oil. Just last year, Obama’s Justice Department dropped charges against Tesoro after its criminal disregard for safety led to the explosion which killed seven workers in Anacortes, Washington, in 2010. Obama has also presided over budget cuts to the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), which now has only one inspector for every 59,000 workers.

To conceal its preparations to sell out the strike, the USW is circulating a petition to oil management and Democratic party officials to address safety concerns. “It’s time to get serious [!] about the safe operation of these facilities and get the hard-working, highly-skilled members of the United Steelworkers back to work. Click here to sign the petition,” its statement reads.

Such measures are aimed at demoralizing workers and blocking any genuine effort by strikers to reach out to broader layers of the working class facing the same attacks. The USW—whose president Leo Gerard sits on Obama’s corporate competitiveness board—knows full well that expanding the struggle would lead to a direct political confrontation with the Obama administration, which has made slashing wages and imposing the costs of health care and pensions on the backs of workers the centerpiece of its economic policy.

That is why rank-and-file workers must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the USW, through the formation of independent strike committees to extend the strike throughout the industry and beyond. The defense of the social rights of workers necessarily is a political struggle against the Obama administration, both big business parties and the capitalist profit system they defend.

Like other workers, refinery workers are furious over

decades of stagnating wages, rising health care and living costs, and the companies' disregard for their health and safety. They have shown their determination to take on some of the world's largest corporations in the face of great odds. More importantly, they have begun to draw the connections between their struggle and the situation confronting the working class as a whole.

Referring to the economic situation, a striking worker at BP's Whiting, Indiana refinery told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "There's been an economic recovery for Wall Street. Who can afford to buy a new car? Auto workers can't."

"They got teachers making \$22,000 and superintendents making hundreds of thousands," another said. "But they want to cut budgets and cut schools. They don't want public education. It's sad when you work so hard and your kids still have \$90,000 of student loans."

Referring to the Obama administration's treatment of the banks, another BP worker said, "The sickening thing is that they gave all the CEOs bailouts for failing! It's exactly the way it was when there was a king."

Many workers expressed their frustrations that multibillion-dollar oil companies such as BP disregarded their need for improved wages and safety. WSWS reporters warned of the dangers of the selective strike policy imposed by the USW, which has shut down only 11 of the 64 refineries it organizes across the US. When they stressed the need to mobilize workers across the country and around the world in a unified struggle, one worker responded, "Then there would be a revolution!"

In Toledo, Ohio, a BP-Husky worker with 22 years experience pointed to the massive profits being made in the oil industry. In 2014, the big five oil companies—BP, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil and Shell—raked in \$90 billion, despite falling oil prices. "I believe this facility alone pulled in something like \$3-4 billion last year, in profits alone. If anyone says there is no money or that the oil companies are being hit by the economic crisis, that's simply a lie."

A worker at LyondellBasell refinery near Houston noted the significance of a struggle for higher wages. "All these companies say they're committed to paying their workers 'competitive' wages," he said. "That means that if wages go up at one plant, then all the

other plants are going to have to raise theirs as well, otherwise workers will start leaving. None of them want that."

The WSWS also spoke with picketers at the Tesoro Martinez refinery in northern California. A picket captain who had been at Tesoro since 1979 said that last year he was paying \$800 per month for health care at Kaiser. That was too much, so he got on to an inferior plan, which costs him \$600 a month. He said, "Three years ago the company told us 'take the contract or we're going to spend whatever it costs to break you.'"



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