

As talks are suspended

Ohio BP-Husky workers express support for national oil strike

Eric London
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The largest US oil strike in 35 years continued into its twelfth day on Thursday, as 5,200 strikers in California, Texas, Washington, Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky continue their struggle with the world's largest and most profitable oil corporations.

Behind-the-scenes talks between the United Steelworkers and lead industry bargainer Royal Dutch Shell were suspended late Wednesday after the oil giant claimed it needed more time to present information requested by the union. Shell says it will not resume negotiations until February 18.

The top five Big Oil companies—BP, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, Exxon Mobil, and Shell—made \$93 billion in profits last year, or \$177,000 per minute. While refusing to concede to any of the demands for improved pay and working conditions, the oil companies have vowed to use strikebreakers to continue production.

At the BP-Husky refinery outside of Toledo, Ohio, workers withstood freezing temperatures to picket yesterday. Early in the morning, the company had rented vehicles to bring scabs into the refinery as picketers gathered. The buses had dark tinted windows, allowing for the replacements to remain hidden and anonymous.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team spoke to workers later that morning as they walked the picket line and warmed up around burning barrels. “The Wall Street brokers and corporate executives who stole our money are making millions and they say we don’t deserve high wages,” said an oil worker with seven years experience at BP-Husky.

“CEO pay has shot up hundreds of times but the guy on the front line is getting benefit and wage cuts,” he

said.

Henry, an oil worker with 17 years on the job, said he strongly supported a national walkout by all 30,000 USW-organized workers in the industry. “It would have a snowball effect,” he said, noting that oil workers had the opportunity to open up a fight for safe working conditions and better wages that would come to involve the entire working class.

“I’m hoping to have more of us on strike,” said Joy, another oil worker. “Our priority is we want more jobs and [the company] wants to cut jobs and that’s not good for our families. As far as safety is concerned, we ain’t making cupcakes in there. One wrong move could be devastating.”

While workers expressed their determination to fight, the United Steelworkers union has limited the strike to only 5,400 workers and is carrying out largely symbolic picketing at only ten of 64 USW-organized refineries. These represent about 13 percent of total US oil processing capacity. A full strike would shut down 64 percent of refinery capacity.

In other words, the USW is forcing over 24,000 workers to act essentially as strikebreakers against their brothers and sisters on the picket lines. In this way, the USW is ensuring that corporate behemoths stay profitable during the strike.

Facing no serious challenge, negotiators for Shell have proposed six contracts so insulting that even the USW was forced to reject them. The union executives know full well they could never get such a sellout deal past rank-and-file oil workers.

USW executives have released no details of the oil companies’ demands. To do so would reveal the intransigence of the corporations and demonstrate to

workers that they must respond in kind. Instead, the USW has sought to sow complacency among the ranks of workers, suggesting that continued negotiating and pathetic petition appeals to the corporations and big-business politicians will resolve the struggle.

The union has also not revealed its demands, issuing instead vague references to safety and staffing demands. This is only an indication that the union is prepared to accept some worthless promise of improvements from management to shut down the strike and condition workers for a sellout agreement.

The oil conglomerates—enjoying the full backing of the Obama administration and the rest of the bought-and-paid-for politicians from both big-business parties—are on the offensive and know they can count on the treachery of the USW.

Andy Lipow, the president of Houston's Lipow Oil Associates, bragged in an interview with oil industry website FuelFix earlier in February that the current strike will "have much less of an impact" than the 1980 nationwide oil strike because of the union's plan for isolated and largely ineffectual selective strikes.

In the same article, pro-management labor lawyer Steve Roppolo with the Houston firm Fisher & Phillips added: "I sometimes question [the striking workers'] capacity to hold out for long periods of time... if I had to guess, I would think it will be a relatively short lived action."

If the conduct of the negotiations and the struggle is left in the hands of USW President Leo Gerard, Vice President Gary Beevers and the rest of the union bureaucracy, the strike will be betrayed and workers defeated. That is why a rank-and-file strike committee, consisting of the most class-conscious and militant workers, must be formed to demand the details of the backroom negotiations be made public, and to extend the strike throughout the industry.

As the strike nears the completion of its second week, the resolve of striking oil workers continues to grow. At BP-Husky in Ohio yesterday morning, workers were upbeat and determined. The mood was not dampened by either the roving police cars provocatively cruising across the picket line or by the unmarked cars of hired thugs sent to spy on and intimidate the pickets.

Many workers spoke on the dangerous conditions associated with refinery work. Oil workers take in crude oil, heat it to temperatures of up to thousands of

degrees, and process it into gasoline and other fuels. Workers spoke of 12-hour shifts in demanding, tiring conditions.

Dan, a pipefitter who came out to picket in support of the oil workers, said he supported the oil workers. "I know what's right and what's wrong," he said. Angered by the fact that the union kept tens of thousands of USW oil workers on the job while only a small portion struck, he said, "Some fat cat union guy is making plans to go golfing with management or to their condos in Florida—but this effects my way of life. One thing I've realized in life: the Democrats and Republicans are all the same."

Dan added: "I'm not even sure if my union [Plumbers and Pipefitters] is even honoring the oil workers' picket line. For our union to do that, it's not ok."

Another veteran oil worker said, "Corporate America controls our government. The politicians from both parties answer to the money and Big Oil. They say there is no money for schools or anything else. And look you have teachers making \$20,000 after paying for four years college and more. Young autoworkers are making a poverty wage.

"I worked as a skilled tradesman at Ford and was hired in at \$21.10 in 1995. I make twice that here but I can buy less with it. Our real wages have declined.

"I know older guys who were in the steel industry. Hundreds of thousands lost their jobs. Two years before these guys were set to retire they lost their pensions and health care and were left with nothing. US Steel and other companies just sucked everything away from them. They said working at the steel mill was like entering hell. "The corporations buy the politicians. These guys make the laws. Who are they going to make the laws to protect—the working class or the wealthy? That billionaire Warren Buffett said he was paying a rate of taxes that was lower than his secretary's. What does that say?

"It's hitting everybody—it's going to take a revolution to change it."



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