

Oil workers on strike denounce poor safety and work conditions at US refineries

Our reporters
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The strike by more than 5,000 oil refinery workers in the US has entered its second week. Behind-the-scenes negotiations between the United Steelworkers and the lead industry bargainer, Royal Dutch Shell, have been put off by the company until February 18, following an offer by the USW on Wednesday.

Despite the break in negotiations, the USW announced on Friday that it was not filing any new strike notices for refineries that continue to operate on rolling 24-hour contract extensions. This follows the union's practice of seeking to contain the strike as much as possible. Less than one-fifth of the 30,000 refinery workers in the USW are currently on strike.

Most of the refineries that are on strike continue to operate, with the Big Five oil companies (Shell, BP, Chevron, ConocoPhillips and ExxonMobil) using management and engineers as scabs. The companies, which made billions of dollars of profit last year, are relying on the union to ensure that the impact of the strike is as minimal as possible.

Also on Friday, ExxonMobil announced that it was seeking to sign a separate, five-year contract with the USW local at its Beaumont, Texas refinery, which is currently not on strike. The aim is to break the national synchronization of oil worker contracts, as negotiations with Shell are for a three-year deal.

The proposed contract in Beaumont includes a 75-day notice before strike action can take place after the contract expires. The USW has indicated it is open to reaching a deal.

The only refinery whose operations have been completely halted is the Tesoro Golden Eagle Refinery in Martinez, California, where one-half of the plant's output was already shut down due to construction.

The WSWS interviewed some of the striking workers at the Tesoro refinery on Friday. Many spoke about the

deplorable safety conditions that oil workers face on a daily basis.

"I'll give you an example," one worker said, pointing to the danger of hydrogen sulfide. "Below 100 parts per million, it smells like rotten eggs. Above 100 parts per million, it deadens your senses real fast and you're in trouble. One day I was walking into a room, and I did as I always do, I just started to sniff, not take a deep breath, just sniff. It was tentative. I smelled rotten eggs and I backed out of the room. As I did, I blacked out.

"A fellow worker got oxygen on me, and I survived. But afterwards, we tested the room where there was the leak. Four hundred parts per million is what they call IDLH, In Danger of Life and Health. The device registered at over 1,500 parts per million. If I had taken one breath, just one breath, if that had gotten in my lungs, I would have died. As the doctor later said to me, 'Why am I talking to you? You should be dead.'"

The worker referred to another incident in 1983. "There was a section of pipe that had been patched 73 times. They had a replacement pipe lying right next to it, but waited to replace it. They wanted to do it on a turnaround, to get a tax write-off. It was bound to fail, and it did.

"In 1999, there was a fire that killed four and injured one badly. I've lost friends, almost everyone knows somebody who's gotten hurt. One friend of mine got second and third degree burns on 86 percent of his body. He suffered for eight weeks before he died. Once you've seen something like that, you never forget it."

Safety problems are compounded by overwork and long shifts. "We've had people who have 12-hour shifts—12 hours on, 12 hours off, for 15 days," the worker said.

"The companies don't want to hire the number of people necessary for proper safety. Plus, they might put

a guy with little training on a job where he is a foreman over people with much more experience. One foreman here has worked eight months and is supervising people with thirty or more years of experience.”

The worker said that sick days are another major issue. While new workers get no sick days, experienced workers can get up to 100 sick days. However, they are penalized if they take multiple days in a row. “So in practice it doesn’t amount to much,’ he said. ‘Some of us work in a small, enclosed area where there are five or six of us. If one gets sick, you know the rest will too. We shouldn’t have to work around high temperatures and high pressure, with highly toxic chemicals, if we are feeling sick.”

Another worker spoke about the grueling work schedule. “Your standard shift is 12 hours a day, four days on the day shift, four days off, then four days on the night shift. But if there’s an emergency or we’re short-staffed, they’ll keep you on for an 18-hour day, or they’ll call you in for a fifth day in a row. At least in my unit they almost always call you in for a fifth day and a sometimes a sixth.”

The company has also begun regular use of lower-paid contract workers. “In my unit the maintenance workers and the pipe-fitters have been replaced by contractors with no benefits, no job security, no retirement. If they’re working here every day just like us, they should be employees.”

He added, “The latest demand of Shell [which runs a refinery nearby] has been to remove the retrogression clause from our contract. That’s the bit that says if someone new buys the refinery, the new owner has to honor our contract. They can’t just lay all of us off. That’s been in the contract since the 1960s.”

Ashley, an environmental representative from the Shell refinery, which is not on strike, said, “It’s insulting that they’d try and take away the retrogression clause. We’ve given them a record year with the lowest environmental numbers and lowest number of accidents. You can’t expect a replacement worker to know the units.

“I think it’s sickening that these refiners are turning a profit during the strike. They’re making all that money and they still act like there’s no way to pay us what we deserve.”

David, who was at the refinery during the 1980 strike, said, “I’d almost bet the company is paying off the

media not to cover our strike.”

He also spoke of the conditions facing other sections of the working class. “My wife’s a teacher and making the same pay she was 10 years ago. They need to walk off the job and see how long the principals can teach those classrooms. Otherwise, they’re just going to keep cutting those wages back.”

One young worker added, “To run the refineries, they’re putting people on who haven’t worked in ten years. It can take nine months to a year to certify just for an entry-level operator position, and they’re just throwing in managers and scabs. You can bet they’re rushing to cover up accidents and spills.”

Referring to the lockout of West Coast dockworkers over the weekend, he added, “I don’t think it’s just Tesoro or just the oil companies that are hurting workers. It would get a lot of attention real quick if the dockworkers were on strike the same time as the refineries.”



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