

Explosion rocks California refinery as oil strike continues

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A massive explosion ripped through the ExxonMobil refinery in Torrance, California Wednesday morning, shaking local homes and schools with the equivalent of a magnitude 1.7 earthquake and igniting a three-alarm fire that spewed ash and a gaseous odor in the industrial city 20 miles south of Los Angeles. The explosion, which injured four workers, highlights the warnings striking oil workers have made about the dangerous working conditions they confront due to undermanning, overwork and fatigue.

The largest US oil strike in decades has reached its 19th day today with 5,200 refinery workers continuing to picket nine refineries and two other facilities in California, Texas, Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana and Washington state. After a weeklong delay, negotiations between the United Steelworkers and Shell, the lead industry bargainer, resumed Wednesday under a news blackout agreed to by the union.

Although there is widespread sentiment for a national strike to shut down the industry, the USW has deliberately limited the strike, calling out less than one-fifth of the 30,000 oil workers it represents. While the USW has said safety is the main issue it has ordered its members to continue to work at 55 refineries, including the Torrance facility.

While the exact cause of the blast in the gasoline-processing unit has not been determined, it cannot be ruled out that the oil giants—which have already employed aggressive speedup and cost-cutting measures that imperil workers—are ramping up production at the non-striking refineries even more to make up for lost capacity during the strike.

ExxonMobil workers at the Torrance facility will continue to work while 3.5 miles away 800 workers in the same union local—USW Local 675—are on strike at Tesoro's Carson refinery.

Asked whether the ongoing strike would expand because of Wednesday's explosion, USW Local 675's Secretary-Treasurer Dave Campbell told *ThinkProgress*, "I don't know at this point. I'm not really thinking about that. I do know that people are angry and upset, not quite sure if us giving 24 hours notice of going on strike helps — but a lot of people have the emotion that they want to do it, and we'll see."

Earlier this week, Campbell said USW members at the oil terminal—run by Tesoro Logistics LP—at the nearby Port of Long Beach could join the strike, and the local would meet with the International Longshore Workers Unions to discuss whether they would honor a walkout. "We're all dealing with employers that seem to think they can push unions off the cliff, and we're fighting back," Campbell told Reuters Tuesday. "We might have a big labor confrontation at the Los Angeles and Long Beach harbor."

The Pacific Maritime Association locked out 20,000 dockworkers over the holiday weekend in a dispute over the destruction of jobs and working conditions. Like the USW, the ILWU is engaged in backroom talks, in this case mediated by Obama's secretary of labor, to prevent a walkout by workers who have been laboring without a contract for nine months.

Both unions, which are closely tied to the Obama administration, are determined to block a united struggle by oil workers and dockworkers because it could become a catalyst for broader struggle of the working class to reverse decades of declining living standards and working conditions.

The international implications of strike actions by US oil workers were highlighted Wednesday, as reports emerged of plans for another strike by workers in oil facilities based around the North Sea. Although they

collectively made \$90 billion in profits last year, the top five Big Oil companies—Shell, ExxonMobil, BP, Chevron and ConocoPhillips—are using the fall in crude oil prices to press for wage and benefit cuts and an expansion of contract workers who have little or no job security or basic rights.

While spending billions on dividends and stock buybacks to enrich their investors, the oil giants are refusing to budge on workers' demands for improved wages and working conditions and have allowed much of their infrastructure to decay. Shell announced this week it will postpone major renovations at its 330,000 barrels per day Deer Park, Texas refinery, until September. The facility will continue operations in the intervening months despite the postponement, according to *Reuters*.

The *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) spoke to striking workers outside a refinery in Toledo, Ohio on Wednesday. The WSWS reporters explained the need to take the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the USW through the creation of a rank-and-file committee to expand the strike throughout the industry and reach out to broader sections of the working class to fight the corporations and both big business parties.

“I come from a union family. My father and grandfathers were union workers. Growing up, I was taught respect and gratitude for these organizations, for defending our right to a decent living,” said Dan. “That being said, I can’t help but agree with what I am hearing from you guys on the way the unions have changed during my lifetime. Every strike seems to be the same story: keep it short, keep it small.

“My main priority is feeding my family. I certainly don’t want to be out here picketing, not getting paid. And from what I have seen with every other strike in recent times, this is going to achieve exactly nothing for us workers. We do the legwork out here on strike, and then the rewards are minimal to zero,” Dan said.

“We’re going to get \$200 a week in strike pay, and even that doesn’t start for another couple weeks,” Sean, another picketer, told the WSWS. “The company has been bringing in contractors to do safety work that should be done by unfilled positions on our crew. The contractors are good guys, don’t get me wrong, but they are not coming to work here every day. They are here to fix something for a single day, and if it causes an explosion, they won’t be anywhere near.

“We’re in there everyday dealing with some seriously flammable stuff, and we all take pride in doing the job right, to keep our brothers safe. But the company wants the smallest workforce they can get, so they prefer to bring in outside hires to do the job quick and dirty.

“Those of us who do work here full time, they work us to the fullest, I can tell you that. It’s not unusual for me to work eight-day weeks, 12 hours per day in that oil house. I love my job, but I feel sad at times about how much of my life it has taken.”



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