

USW forced to reject another contract offer as oil workers press for national strike

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Negotiators for the United Steelworkers (USW) rejected the latest offer from lead industry bargainer Shell late Thursday, saying it failed to improve safety at refineries in “an enforceable way.” This is at least the seventh offer rejected in the closed door negotiations between the company and the USW, which is facing the growing combativeness of oil workers, now in the third week of their strike.

The USW is well aware of the growing opposition to its selective strike policy and is seeking to contain it in some way. The union has only called out 5,200 out of 30,000 USW-organized oil workers, affecting just 13 percent of refinery capacity instead of the 65 percent the union could shut down. USW officials have suggested they might expand the walkout in coming days.

“New offer fails to improve safety in enforceable way,” the USW said in the text message cited by Reuters. “All units instructed to reject and prepare to join (unfair labor practices) strike if called upon. Union at table ready to bargain.”

One can easily imagine the setting in which the ongoing talks are taking place. Top USW bureaucrats are meeting, amidst near-total secrecy, in executive suites in Houston essentially begging Big Oil’s negotiators to give them something “palatable” to sell to their members. Aware that their USW labor police force would do nothing to seriously threaten their “partnership,” the oil giants are simply waiting out the largely ineffective strike, knowing that picketers, many of them walking the line in sub-zero temperatures in the Midwest, are struggling without strike pay from the USW or company-paid health benefits.

“We can continue on running with the staffing levels that we have,” Tesoro CEO Geoff Goff said in comments to corporate investors last week, adding that

production could be continued at present levels, “for a very long period of time.”

Reaping more than \$90 billion in profits collectively, the top five oil corporations are pouring billions into dividend payments and stock buybacks to enrich their investors, while refusing to spend money to properly upgrade their facilities or improve the wages and safety conditions of workers.

For its part, the USW wants to shut the strike down as soon as possible before it inspires other sections of workers, including dockworkers, teachers, Verizon workers and GM, Ford and Chrysler workers, to fight to recoup years of lost income. USW International President Leo Gerard serves on the President Barack Obama’s trade policy and corporate competitiveness boards, where he sits with top executives to discuss how to slash labor costs and boost profits.

There is widespread support in the working class for the oil workers. On Thursday, WSWs reporters visited the Pittsburgh-area Edgar Thomson Steel Works, operated by US Steel, and spoke with workers about the oil strike. Despite a wind chill of -11°F, workers stopped to express their support.

One worker who has worked at the plant for eight years, asked, “Why aren’t we all out [on strike]?” Upon learning the oil workers are also organized by the USW, he said, “The union hall’s right over there, you can go tell the union reps they’re not worth a damn.”

Another worker explained that he had worked for US Steel in the 1980s, but was laid off when his plant closed down. Even though USS rehired him, the worker told the WSWs that his previous time was not counted toward retirement benefits.

On the picket line at the BP-Husky refinery, one striking worker said, “They want to change the work rules so they can avoid replacing retirees with full-time

new hires, allowing them to work us double-time and bring in private contractors instead.”

Workers said that contractors, hired by the companies to perform safety-related repairs on a short-term and often piecemeal basis, are less experienced and accountable than the full time workers. The remaining long-term hires are coping with grinding fatigue, with many working 12 plus hour shifts for weeks on end.

Such policies were sanctioned by the USW in the 2012 contract, which allowed management to work employees for 14 consecutive days. They have life-threatening consequences. This was highlighted Wednesday when a huge explosion injured several workers at an ExxonMobil refinery in Torrance, California, where the USW has ordered its 274 members to continue working despite the strike.

In the wake of the blast—which would presumably give the USW ample ammunition to expose the criminal negligence of the oil bosses—the response of the union has been rather low-key. Although USW local officials acknowledged that workers at the refinery were in favor of walking out and joining strikers after the blast, the union has blocked any such action.

In fact, the USW has not called out workers at any refineries owned by ExxonMobil, the largest publicly traded oil and gas company in the world. The company is currently seeking a separate five-year deal with a USW local in Beaumont, Texas, which would pull workers out of the national bargaining agreement and bar joint strike action.

While the local has so far resisted the offer—which the company says it needs to expand capacity at the facility east of Houston—Richard Landry, international representative of the USW, said separate deals with locals were impermissible unless a union local accepted it.

The continued sabotage of the strike by the USW is the greatest danger workers face. There is enormous support for a fight to defend living standards and safety conditions but to mobilize that support the conduct of the strike must be taken out of the hands of the USW.

New organizations of struggle, including rank-and-file strike committees, must be organized to set up pickets at every refinery, chemical plant and oil terminal to shut the entire industry down. At the same time this fight must be linked up with West Coast

dockers, teachers, auto workers and other sections of the working class in opposition to the corporations and both big business parties.



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