

Striking oil workers from Kentucky, Ohio and Louisiana speak out

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As the strike by oil refinery workers entered its fourth week, workers remained resilient and defiant in the face of intransigence by the oil giants. Over the weekend, 1,500 additional workers in Texas and Louisiana joined the strike, raising the total number of workers on strike to 6,500.

Facing growing criticism from rank-and-file workers over its limited strike policy—which has only involved one-fifth of the 30,000 oil workers organized by the United Steelworkers (USW)—the union called a protest rally Tuesday outside the headquarters of Marathon Oil in Findlay, Ohio.

An estimated crowd of 500 strikers and their supporters—mostly from the BP-Husky refinery in Toledo, Ohio and Marathon refinery in Catlettsburg, Kentucky—attended the protest.

In contrast to the speeches by union officials, who led chants of “one day longer, one day stronger” and sought to justify the union’s selective strike policy, many workers at the demonstration said they supported expanding the strike.

“I think everyone would be in favor of a national strike to bring all of the refineries out,” said Kenneth Barker, who had traveled to Findlay from Kentucky. “But right now [the unions are] taking a few out at a time.”

Linda Haman and Carol Alspach, both retired workers at appliance maker Honeywell, happened upon the demonstration while visiting a nearby restaurant. Linda asked, “Why aren’t the other refineries on strike as well?” Carol added, “You have to fight every minute. We are really on thin ice. There should absolutely be a national strike.”

Renée Walker and Don Tuite, refinery maintenance workers at the BP-Husky refinery in Toledo, took a day off work to participate in the demonstration. They are

part of a group of maintenance workers at the refinery who are not on strike because of the selective strike policy.

Renée, who has been a refinery worker for 27 years, said employees at refineries can be compelled to work virtually around the clock. Don reported he had just completed a series of 16 hour-shifts.

Renée added, “They can force you to work 20 out of 24 hours a day. That still goes on. Up until our last contract in 2012, they could force you to work unlimited 16-hour shifts. They can still do it, but they have to give you days off.

“I live 30 miles from work,” she said. “I couldn’t even go home after shifts. We used to either stay at work and sleep in a chair between shifts, or a coworker and I would rent a room, sleep for three hours, and go back to work.”

Renee said these conditions left workers sleep-deprived in dangerous conditions. “We work with benzene, toluene and xylene. Benzene freezes at 42°. If you have to thaw something out, you have to put a coil of steam hose over your shoulder, climb a 150-foot tower, hook it up and climb down to connect the hose to a steam line. Then you have to climb back up and stay up there for hours thawing out a pipe. This is not a safe place to work.”

Union officials at the rally promoted the Democratic Party as so-called ‘friends of labor.’ A representative from Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown’s office read a perfunctory statement of support. Brown is promoter of economic nationalism and protectionism, making him a natural ally of the USW, which has spent decades spewing “Buy American” chauvinism while it collaborated in the betrayal and sellout of strikes, the closure of steel mills, and the destruction of the jobs and pensions of hundreds of thousands of steel workers.

The handiwork of the USW could be seen a short distance from the rally, where the struggle of Cooper Tire workers, who were locked out in 2012-13, was betrayed. The USW pushed through a contract that expanded the power of management to re-rate jobs, lower wage rates, and drive out older, higher-paid workers, replacing them with young workers making \$13 an hour.

Over the weekend, the oil strike was expanded to three refineries owned by Motiva Enterprises, a joint venture between Shell and Saudi-owned Aramco. The refineries are located in Port Arthur, Texas and Convent and Norco, Louisiana.

On Tuesday, WSWS reporters visited the picket line in Norco where workers expressed anger over inadequate safety in the plants, specifically pointing to the problem of reduced crews. “[We need to] do something to get our numbers back up,” one worker told WSWS reporters. Another worker added, “When I first came on thirty-five years ago, we had about 30 welders. Now we have six.”

Workers expressed opposition to the Obama administration. Pointing to the experience of dockworkers who were recently locked out on the West Coast, refinery worker Wade Spears said the most likely response of the Obama administration to an all-out refinery strike would be to intervene on behalf of the corporations.

Another Norco worker was also highly critical of the Obama administration. When asked about Obama’s role in shutting down the dockworkers strike, he said, “I figured it would happen. Both parties are the same.”



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