

The US oil strike and the international struggles of the working class

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The strike by US oil refinery workers, now in its fourth week, is an expression of the growing readiness of workers to fight in defense of jobs, wages, safety and working conditions. The walkout, involving 6,500 workers, is the biggest strike in the American oil industry since 1980. It is part of a broader effort by workers—dockworkers, teachers, postal workers, auto workers and others—to reverse decades of declining living standards.

The United Steelworkers union (USW) is seeking to limit the strike, calling out only a fifth of its 30,000-strong membership in the industry and picketing only 12 of 63 refineries. The USW is closely aligned with the Obama administration and is working to prevent the walkout from developing into a political confrontation with the White House, which just last weekend intervened to block a strike by 20,000 dockworkers on the West Coast.

Facing only a minimal curtailment of production, Shell, ExxonMobil, BP, Chevron and other oil giants have refused to back down on demands for a derisory wage increase, dangerously long work schedules, and the replacement of more full-time workers with temporary contract workers.

It is necessary to take the strike forward and break out of the confines imposed by the USW. As a first step, the work stoppage should be extended to refineries across the country. An appeal should be issued to every section of the working class to defend the oil workers against any strike-breaking intervention by the Obama administration or the courts.

This, however, is only the beginning. Oil workers and the working class as a whole must develop a broader political strategy.

The problems confronting US oil workers are part of a national, and, in fact, international crisis. In every

country, workers are under attack from giant multinational corporations and banks, which are backed by governments of the so-called “left” as well as the right. The current offensive against jobs, wages, pensions and social benefits—whether in Athens or Detroit—follows decades of downsizing and wage-cutting. The US has passed through the longest period of wage stagnation since the Great Depression.

The government-corporate assault was stepped up in the aftermath of the 2008 Wall Street crash, as the ruling elites in the US and around the world implemented policies to make the working class pay for the multi-trillion-dollar bailout of the financial aristocracy.

In country after country, savage austerity programs have been implemented and so-called “structural reforms” imposed to destroy whatever remained of the social gains won by workers over the course of a century of struggle. All restraints on the exploitation of workers and the plundering of society by the banks and corporations are being lifted.

The result is the wholesale impoverishment of working people alongside record corporate profits, soaring stock prices and CEO pay packages in the tens and even hundreds of millions of dollars. Social inequality is back to the levels that prevailed at the turn of the last century. To cite one statistic: 80 billionaires possess more wealth than the bottom 50 percent of humanity—3.5 billion people.

Every attempt by workers to resist, whether in Europe, Asia, South America or North America, has been blocked or sabotaged by the trade unions, which have focused all their efforts on suppressing the class struggle, becoming transformed into appendages of the corporations and the state.

The fall in crude oil prices, itself an expression of the

crisis of the profit system, has been seized on to mount a global attack on oil workers. Even as Big Oil hands over tens of billions to wealthy shareholders—in the form of dividends and stock buybacks—it wages a ruthless offensive against workers’ jobs, wages and working conditions.

Oil workers in particular face an industry that is international in character. In the North Sea, some 20,000 construction and oil rig workers are facing wage cuts of up to 15 percent and demands for an additional 28 days of offshore work each year with no increase in pay, while the workforce is cut by a fifth. BP, Marathon, Canadian Natural Resources and other firms want to impose the same grueling work schedule on British workers that US workers already face in the Gulf of Mexico. In response, North Sea workers are balloting for strike action next month.

The resistance of oil workers is one sign of an emerging movement of the working class internationally. Thousands of German train drivers have walked out to oppose job cuts, pay reductions and other attacks. In western Australia, where the collapse of the mineral boom has led to tens of thousands of layoffs, coal train drivers are going out on strike. This follows the walkout by Canadian Pacific rail workers that ended after the strike-breaking intervention of the Harper government.

Workers all over the world confront the failure of an entire economic system—capitalism. They also confront the bankruptcy of the trade unions. These organizations are unalterably tied to capitalism and wedded to its nation-state framework. Aligned with their own national capitalist class, they collaborate in the gutting of jobs and living standards in the name of boosting the “competitiveness” of corporations based in their own country.

The president of the USW, Leo Gerard, is a specialist in the vilest forms of American nationalism, denouncing “currency manipulation” by China and “dumping” by Korean steelmakers and calling for protectionist measures to boost “national security” and military preparedness. On the basis of economic nationalism, the USW has collaborated with the steel bosses to destroy the jobs and pensions of hundreds of thousands of workers.

These betrayals are not simply the product of personal cowardice or corruption. The failure of the

unions in the US and around the world is rooted in their incapacity to provide an international strategy to oppose the capitalist system.

Oil workers in the US and Europe, train drivers in Germany and Australia, and every other section of workers entering into struggle require a perspective and strategy that take into account the broader historical, economic and political processes that underlie the present crisis and the immediate attacks they face.

Only on the basis of an international policy directed against the capitalist system is it possible to effectively oppose transnational corporations that operate on a world scale. Moreover, such an international policy is a prerequisite for uniting the workers within any country and overcoming the ceaseless efforts of the ruling class to sow divisions based on race, religion, language, etc.

Workers in the US and around the world must answer the globally coordinated assault on their jobs and living standards with a strategy to unite the international working class against the capitalist system. This requires the building of new organizations of struggle, independent of the nationalist and pro-capitalist trade unions, to reach out to the broadest sections of the working class nationally and internationally.

A new leadership must be built to unite the working class internationally and imbue its struggles with an independent political strategy to take power and reorganize economic life on the basis of human need, not private profit. This is the perspective of socialist internationalism fought for by the Socialist Equality Party in the US and our sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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