

Talks remain suspended as US oil workers continue strike

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25 February 2015

US oil workers are locked in a bitter battle with some of the largest corporations in the world, but the United Steelworkers union continues to undermine their nearly four-week strike by limiting the job action to only 6,500 of the 30,000 industry workers who are members of the USW.

No new negotiations have been scheduled since talks broke down last week, and the oil giants have refused to budge on workers' demands for improved wages, safety provisions and working conditions. The lead industry bargainer is insisting that the companies have "sole and exclusive rights" to determine staffing, including the replacement of union workers with part-time and temporary contractors.

The corporations' criminal disregard for the safety of workers and surrounding communities was highlighted once again Wednesday morning when a crude distillation unit malfunctioned at the BP refinery in Whiting, Indiana, leaking inflammable vapors and triggering evacuation sirens around 7:30 am, according to striking workers. This followed a gas flare-up Monday morning at the refinery, which is being operated by management and contractors and is located just 17 miles from Chicago.

In the face of the intransigence of the oil companies, the USW and the AFL-CIO continue to isolate the strike.

On the picket lines, there is mounting criticism of the USW's selective strike policy, and support for a national strike. At the Tesoro Carson refinery, outside of Los Angeles, a worker with 35 years in the industry told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "They should bring the hammer down. I'm talking about the United Steelworkers. They should be pulling everybody and everything out to win this strike."

He added, "We don't get told anything by the union. I don't know what the union's strategy or anything is. We're just out here on the picket lines. But I've read everything you guys have written, and I think you're right."

In an effort to mollify opposition, the USW last weekend called out 1,500 additional workers at three refineries and a chemical plant owned by Motiva Enterprises—a joint venture

between Shell and Saudi Refinery Inc.—in Port Arthur, Texas and in Convent and Norco, Louisiana. The USW continues to block action at the biggest US energy giants—ExxonMobil, Chevron and ConocoPhillips—even though workers at these companies want to join the strike.

On Tuesday, USW President Leo Gerard hinted that the strike might expand further, telling Reuters it "depends on what happens in the next round of negotiations and that those negotiations resume fairly quickly."

Gerard acknowledged the dangerous conditions oil workers face, telling Reuters that fires or explosions have occurred every eight days on average since an April 2010 blast at Tesoro's refinery in Anacortes, Washington that claimed the lives of seven workers. "From 2010 to now, there have been 27 people who have been killed" in accidents at refineries, Gerard said.

The USW president spoke to Reuters by phone from Atlanta, where the AFL-CIO Executive Council was convening its annual winter meeting. Predictably, the union officials took no action to mobilize wider sections of the working class in defense of the oil workers. This recalled similar inaction in 1981, when the AFL-CIO Executive Council refused to oppose Reagan's firing of 13,000 PATCO air traffic controllers, paving the way for a decade of union-busting, mass layoffs and wage-cutting.

Instead, the union officials said they would hold several "Raising Wages" summits between now and the end of 2015 to drum up support for the Democratic Party in the first four presidential primary states of Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada and South Carolina. USW President Gerard is himself a political confidant of President Obama.

Indicative of the paltry raises the union bureaucrats have in mind, the AFL-CIO praised the decision of Walmart to increase pay from \$7.25 to \$9.00 an hour.

The unions have been complicit in the decades-long assault on working class living standards by big business and the Democratic and Republican parties. Loyal to American capitalism and allied with the Democratic Party, the unions isolated and betrayed strikes and collaborated in downsizing

and wage-cutting in the name of boosting the “competitiveness” (i.e., profits) of corporate America. This was accelerated after the financial crash of 2008, when Obama utilized the services of the United Auto Workers union to halve the wages of all new-hires and eliminate the eight-hour day at GM and Chrysler as part of the forced bankruptcy of the two Detroit auto makers.

The union heads, like the Obama administration, are aware of the growing anger and combativeness of workers, who, after the longest period of wage stagnation since the Great Depression and amidst soaring corporate profits and stock prices, are determined to recoup years of lost income. Since 2009, management compensation has grown 50 percent faster than union workers’ income, Bloomberg News reported recently. In the auto industry, real wages have declined 24 percent since 2003, according to the Center for Automotive Research.

In a conference call with reporters Tuesday, a spokesman for the AFL-CIO said roughly 5 million union members work under labor contracts that are set to expire in 2015.

But far from mobilizing these workers—dockworkers, auto-workers, teachers, Verizon workers and others—the unions intend to isolate and strangle each section of workers individually. Last week, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) caved in to the Obama administration’s demands and aborted a potential strike by 20,000 West Coast dockworkers that would have immeasurably strengthened the oil workers.

The unions want to prevent a broader movement of the working class that would take on a more openly political character and lead to a confrontation between workers and the Obama administration. This would further expose the falsity of the claim promoted by the unions that Obama and the Democrats are “friends of labor.”

While the Democrats are no less beholden to the corporate-financial elite than the Republicans, they generally favor utilizing the services of the unions to suppress the opposition of the working class. The Republicans are more inclined to dispense with the unions altogether.

The only way forward for oil workers is to break the grip of the USW and the AFL-CIO through the organization of rank-and-file strike committees. The first task of these committees would be to extend the strike throughout the oil industry and rally support from the widest sections of the working class in the US and internationally. Such a mobilization could become the starting point for the development of political movement against both big business parties and the profit system they defend.

On the picket lines at the Tesoro Carson refinery, Marc Cavarlez, who has eight years in the industry, summed up many of the issues that are of concern to the strikers. “The

cost of living goes up at least six percent every year,” he said. “The union asked for two percent, and the company slapped us with a counteroffer of one percent. Both are inadequate.

“During shutdowns and turnarounds, when we repair all the equipment to get the refinery up for production, operators and maintenance people are required to work 19 days in a row, 12-hour shifts, with two days off, either at the end of those 19 days or in between. According to the union contract, we are required to put in 14 days in a row and 12-hour shifts. Then we get two days off. Well, you can imagine, we have families. And we want to see them!

“One of the most important things we’re striking about is ‘successorship.’ Three years ago, Tesoro bought this refinery from BP. When that happened, the new owners had to abide by the existing contract. They couldn’t just rip up all the rules and guidelines. The companies don’t want that. But these are our protections. If Tesoro decides to sell to a sister company, we know our wages and benefits will be cut.

“A couple of weeks ago, I was watching Bloomberg News. They were interviewing the CEO of Shell Oil. He makes \$8 million a year! I know the rest of the CEOs make around that much. If they’d cut their pay by one-quarter, that would go a long way for us.

“Some people say we make too much money. Yes, we make between \$80,000 and \$100,000 a year, but we work sometimes 14 or 15 hours a day and are exposed to highly flammable and explosive stuff. If we don’t fight for this now, then every company will pay people dirt wages.”



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