USW blocks way forward for striking oil workers

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With the strike by US oil workers nearing the end of its fourth week, the leadership of the United Steelworkers union has tied the hands of strikers in the face of the intransigence of the energy conglomerates, which have dug in for a drawn out fight. Workers are engaged in a critical battle over safety provisions, impossibly long work schedules, and the continued erosion of their living standards, yet their struggle has been sabotaged by the USW, which has limited the strike to only 6,500 of the 30,000 workers it organizes in the oil industry.

In a "Letter to USW Oil Workers," texted to strikers on Thursday, USW President Leo Gerard made no attempt to explain this crippling policy, let alone how the union plans to respond to companies, which according to Gerard, have "adamantly refused to bargain in good faith." Last week the USW rejected the seventh insulting proposal from lead industry bargainer Shell and the companies have basically walked away from negotiations determined to concede nothing particularly since the current strike has had minimum impact.

Gerard paints a picture of intransigent employers who have stonewalled any proposals to improve safety, agreeing to "meet and discuss" these issues only to give "the impression that they are actually bargaining." The companies have "shut down discussion" about contracting out work and overtime and fatigue standards, he says while grueling schedules keep workers from their families and imperil their lives. Fires are an almost weekly occurrence and 27 oil workers have recently lost their lives, Gerard says, yet "equipment is old and in need of maintenance, but the company considers [it] too costly to take off line and fix properly because it might slow production."

The union's proposals for a minor reduction in huge out-of-pocket health care costs "is not even pennies on a dollar, but they insist they will not budge on this matter." The multi-billion dollar industry has also resisted any improvement in wages.

Finally, Gerard says, the oil companies are trying to run their struck facilities with people "who are unfamiliar with the processes and equipment," which "is arrogant and dangerous, and a threat to our communities."

Having said all of this—which is no doubt true—Gerard does not say he will call out all 30,000 oil workers on strike, let alone appeal to support for solidarity action by auto workers, teachers, dockworkers and others who make up the five million workers with expiring contracts this year. Not a chance. On the contrary, Gerard makes it clear the union will not alter its policy an iota, even though this has led oil workers to a dead end.

Instead, in the most slavish manner, Gerard begs the oil bosses to "recognize" that "we are an efficient and productive workforce." Leaving aside the fact that Gerard is not part of this workforce—instead he makes $217,000 plus perks from sitting on various corporate and government boards—the oil companies are well aware of how much profit they squeeze from workers—and they want even more!

Even as oil workers are facing the fight of their lives, the USW opposes any struggle that would upset relations with its corporate "partners" and the Obama administration. Instead it is looking to establish more "labor-management safety committees" and an agreement on a minimal number of USW workers the oil companies will employ. The latter is so the USW bureaucracy can tell its accountants how much dues money it can rely on to fund the bloated staff of 900 officials at its Pittsburgh headquarters.

The one matter Gerard seems to have accomplished this week at the AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting in Atlanta was an apparent truce in the turf battle with North America's Building Trades Unions (NABTU) over dues money in the refinery business.

While Gerard admits that the oil corporations have

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ignored the recommendations of these various safety committees he nonetheless asks for more. That is because such committees—rather than protecting the lives and limbs of oil workers—offer a path to a lucrative career for corrupt union officials.

In one example, the *World Socialist Web Site* has learned that Matt Plas, a former USW Process Safety Representative at the BP Husky refinery was hired by management as an Environmental Specialist in the months leading up to the strike. He is now making a great deal of money as part of the strikebreaking operation at the BP Husky refinery. Holed up inside the refinery for 19 straight days, in housing set up by the company to accommodate scabs, Plas reportedly stated that the oil companies are preparing for a five-month strike.

The USW has continuously operated behind the backs of workers, ignoring their demands for a national strike of all 30,000 refinery workers and seeking a sellout deal to end the strike and preserve the interests of the union apparatus. Top USW and AFL-CIO officials have maintained close communication with the Obama administration which, fresh from threatening to break a strike by West Coast dockworkers, wants the oil strike shut down before it becomes a catalyst for a much wider struggle by the working class.

In contrast to the USW, on the picket lines and at oil refineries around the country, workers remain determined to beat back the corporations. One worker at the BP Husky refinery in Toledo, where 350 workers are striking, said representatives from the International USW were coming to a union meeting Thursday night to discuss the strike. “The first thing I am going to ask them,” he said, “is why isn’t this a full national strike?”

Another picketer drew attention to the issue of wages, which have stagnated over the last decade. “There has been a lot of talk about the economy rebounding, we aren’t seeing any of it though. It’s the rich that are making good. Our wages haven’t even kept up with inflation.”

Another striking worker drew the connection between conditions faced by oil workers and auto workers and denounced the imposition of two tier wages in the auto industry as a condition of the Obama administration bailout in 2009. “That never should have been done the way it was. Young workers should be able to work their way up to parity with older workers.”

Henry, a restaurant worker at Tony Packo’s Café—a well-known establishment near the BP-Husky plant—commented on the dangers in the industry. “I know they’ve got long hours of work and dangerous conditions. This is not just dangerous for them but also the surrounding communities. I used to live near a Sunoco refinery and there was some sort of explosion a while back. Everything got covered in oily ash. We lived a mile away and our house and car got covered. Living here we can always smell the exhaust from the refineries. I imagine the cancer rate is much higher here than in other areas.”

Reporters from the WSWS also spoke to workers at the Sunoco Oil Refinery at Gerard Point in Philadelphia. The USW worked with the Obama administration to help the private equity firm Carlyle Group acquire the refinery in Philadelphia and agreed to major concessions in 2012, including reductions in overtime pay.

A member of Operating Engineers union told the WSWS, “We are treated like second-class citizens. You get docked 15 minutes for clocking out a second early. I worked eleven hours today. It is supposed to be an eight and a half hour day but they want a lot of overtime. I worked 2,400 or 2,500 hours overtime last year. But they are cheap. I do a lot of digging and they tell me I don’t need a respirator. I put it on anyway. They don’t want to pay for it even though it doesn’t cost much.”

An electrical contractor protested working conditions inside the refinery, “They work us to death. Contract workers have union representation but not the USW. We work an eight and a half hour day but in reality it’s twelve hours, seven days a week. We have the 14th day off.” Asked if he would support a national oil strike, he said, “I have a family to feed but I would not cross a picket line.”

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