

Louisiana oil workers call for expansion of refinery strike

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Midnight last Saturday marked one week since refinery workers at three Louisiana plants, the Shell and Motiva facilities in Norco just west of New Orleans and the Motiva refinery in Convent south of Baton Rouge, joined the largest US oil industry strike since 1980.

The walkout in Louisiana demonstrates the militancy and resolve of the working class in the American Deep South, long maligned in the media and trade union and pseudo-left circles as hopelessly backward and reactionary. Workers who spoke to a team of reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* expressed their determination to fight the attacks on their standard of living, even as the oil companies accumulate record profits, particularly in the refinery sector. Workers also discussed the broader political significance of their struggle, pointing to the decades-long attack on the working class, which has been escalated by the Obama administration.

However, as in other parts of the country, the United Steelworkers bureaucracy has forced them to fight with one hand behind their backs, calling out only a portion of the refineries organized by the union in Louisiana. The huge ExxonMobil refinery in Baton Rouge, the fourth largest refinery in the country, has not been called out, nor is it involved in the negotiations between the USW and the oil companies. The contract for these workers will come up in the next round of negotiations, underscoring the USW's longstanding division of its membership. Meanwhile, the USW has ordered workers at ExxonMobil's refinery in Chalmette, just outside of New Orleans, to remain at work, even though they are covered in the current negotiations.

The oil industry has long been a dominant force in the state of Louisiana, which has the third largest refinery capacity in the country and numerous offshore oil rigs.

The port facilities in South Louisiana, which handle more bulk cargo than anywhere else in the country, also handle large quantities of crude oil arriving through the Gulf of Mexico. The Louisiana Offshore Oil Port, a modified oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico designed to accommodate super-heavy tankers, handles 13 percent of the country's foreign oil.

However, the enormous wealth being generated from the Louisiana oil industry is not evident in the small rural towns where much of the state's refinery capacity is located. Oil refineries are one of the very few relatively decent-paying manufacturing sectors with a significant presence in the state, long since reliant on shipping and a now virtually deceased shipbuilding industry. The unsafe conditions in these plants contribute to the high industrial accident rate in the state. In 2013 for example, an explosion at a petrochemical plant south of Baton Rouge killed two and injured 114. The explosion was so large it could be felt miles away.

Meanwhile, the oil industry has wreaked havoc on the state's fragile ecosystem, literally causing the coastal regions of the state to disappear due to soil erosion. Both the Democrats and the Republicans have shielded the oil companies from any responsibility for this. Former Democratic senator Mary Landrieu worked hand in glove with the Obama administration to shield BP from its responsibility for the 2010 oil spill, the worst environmental catastrophe in the country's history. Meanwhile, the Republican administration of Governor Bobby Jindal worked assiduously to force the dropping of a lawsuit brought against the oil industry, which was filed by a local government levee board over the impact of its degradation of the state's wetlands on hurricane protection. That lawsuit was finally dismissed by a federal judge in February.

A reporting team for the *World Socialist* visited the picket lines at the Shell and Motiva Enterprises—a joint venture between Shell and Saudi Refinery Inc.—facilities in Norco. The two plants, which share the same site along the Mississippi River, sit across the street from the large Valero St. Charles refinery, a nonunion plant.

A worker on the picket line at the main plant entrance spoke with our reporters although he asked to remain anonymous due to a gag order being enforced on the picket line by the USW bureaucracy. He was furious over the insane levels of wealth given to the CEOs of Big Oil. “It’s sad when they make so much money,” he said. “It doesn’t matter how hard we work, they always tell us they didn’t make enough and so we take a cut. These CEOs don’t deserve that money.”

Expressing a desire for a nationwide spread of the strike, he said, “Strike them all, I say.” He criticized the policies of the trade union bureaucracy, which has presided over attacks against the working class for decades. “They cut wages to make themselves look good,” he said.

Referring to the limited character of the strike, he said, “It makes me feel like I’m by myself.” Even in the face of these odds, however, he and other picketers expressed their determination to maintain the fight.

Another striker, Bruce, said that he knew that a resurgence of working-class struggles was inevitable. “It’s a long time coming,” he said. “Someone needs to take a stand.” He spoke about working conditions at the Shell refinery, in which he and other workers are regularly worked to the point of total fatigue.

Many workers are forced to work back-to-back 18-hour shifts for days on end, with only eight hours rest time in between. The companies had been given safety recommendations by inspectors in order to reduce fatigue, which they have regularly ignored. “They manipulate [the recommendations] like they want,” he said.

WSWS reporters pointed out that the strike could not be won as long as the USW kept it isolated, and that it would have to be expanded nationwide. “Exactly,” he said. “I agree.” Reporters then explained that it is not enough to strike against specific companies. The struggle of refinery workers ultimately means a direct struggle against the Obama administration and the CEOs and bankers it defends. “I agree with you 100

percent!” he exclaimed. “You’re speaking the truth.”

He criticized the USW’s secrecy regarding negotiations, which has left the rank-and-file in the dark as the strike ends its first month. “They got a lot of back-door deals going on,” he said.

Bruce then pointed out the political significance that the refinery workers’ strike holds for the working class as a whole. “When they brought out Port Arthur [a refinery in East Texas], I hoped they’d pull us all,” he said. “If we all went out on strike, you’d see regular people come out and support us. Other people would go on strike too!” He explained that if the strike were spread nationwide it would be a signal for all sections of the working class to unite and begin a broader fight.



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