

As strike passes one-month mark

Steelworkers union blocks broadening of oil workers' struggle

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With the US oil refinery workers' strike entering its second month, the struggle has become a critical battle by the working class against some of the richest and most politically influential corporations in the world.

The strike has won the sympathy of tens of millions of working people, who have suffered decades of declining living standards and deteriorating working conditions. But the biggest obstacle to mobilizing the strength of the working class is the United Steelworkers union, which has limited the walkout to only a fraction of the 30,000 USW members employed by the oil companies nationally.

The union has restricted the strike to only 6,500 workers at 12 of the country's 65 USW-organized refineries. This has encouraged the oil giants to maintain a hard line against the workers' demands, which are directed against unsafe working conditions, the replacement of unionized workers with temporary contractors, and crushing out-of-pocket health care costs.

Well aware that the USW's policy is doomed to failure, rank-and-file workers have increasingly demanded an all-out strike. Over the last several days, the USW International has dispatched members of its National Oil Bargaining Policy Committee to union meetings to try to quell the opposition before it turns into an open rebellion.

At one such meeting, held Saturday at the USW Local 1014 hall in Gary, Indiana, hundreds of striking workers from the nearby BP refinery in Whiting peppered bargaining team members Steve Garey and Jim Savage with demands for a national strike.

"We think all 200 refineries and other facilities should go on strike. That's what a lot of us were saying

at the union hall yesterday," a worker on the picket line in Whiting told the *World Socialist Web Site* Sunday afternoon. "If it were up to me, we'd all be going on strike. But I'm not in charge and we don't know what the strategy [of the USW] is."

Asked by WSWs reporters why he thought the union hadn't called a national strike, another picketer said, "Believe me, that question was asked a thousand times last night."

The *Chicago Tribune* cited Savage as saying this was the main question at the union meetings. According to the *Tribune*, "[Savage] said the reason [for limiting the strike] was two-fold: to keep the government from interfering with this labor dispute and to retain some bargaining power if negotiations don't progress. 'If we fire all our bullets out of our gun on day one, what do we say later? If you don't come to the table, we'll do what?' Savage said."

After a month of keeping strikers in the dark, the USW, with this statement, is finally indicating its "strategy"—a combination of cowardice and treachery. The union virtually admits to emasculating the strike in order to avoid an open clash with the Obama administration. Its talk of saving "bullets" for later is deserving only of contempt.

Steve Garey had the nerve to tell striking workers that the greatest danger to their struggle was workers growing discouraged and crossing the picket lines. "We cannot betray each other," Garey said, even as he defended the treachery of the USW leadership.

Over a month into the strike, the companies remain intransigent after making seven insulting "offers." The USW has acknowledged that negotiations, which are scheduled to resume Wednesday, are largely a farce,

with the oil companies ignoring what union bargainers admit are their “lean demands.”

The companies have dug in for a months-long battle, moving managers and strikebreakers from around the country to keep their refineries operating. Workers are stretched thin, with no health care and at best a pittance in strike pay.

If the USW has not “fired all of its bullets,” it is because it fears the development of a broader movement of workers that could quickly assume political dimensions, exposing its anti-working class alliance with Obama and the Democrats.

Having spent six years peddling the lie that Obama is a “friend of labor,” the USW does not want a clash that would show the president and the Democratic Party, no less than their Republican counterparts, to be enemies of the working class and tools of Wall Street and Big Oil.

Just last month, the White House intervened to block a strike by 20,000 West Coast dockworkers and called on the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) to impose a sellout agreement that will further slash jobs and destroy rights won by previous generations of longshoremen.

Slashing the wages of industrial workers has been the centerpiece of Obama’s “economic recovery”—i.e., the boosting of corporate profits and the stock market—beginning with halving the pay of newly hired auto workers as part of the 2009 forced bankruptcy of General Motors and Chrysler. In this drive, Obama has received the full backing of the unions, including the USW, whose president, Leo Gerard, was appointed to Obama’s Advanced Manufacturing Partnership board to help cut labor costs.

Jim Savage, the president of USW Local 10-1 in Philadelphia, epitomizes the anti-worker conspiracy of the unions, the corporations and both political parties. In 2012, he played a key role in imposing concessions, including reductions in pension and overtime payments, to induce the Carlyle Group private equity firm to take over the Sunoco refinery in Philadelphia.

There are some five million workers—teachers, auto workers, Verizon telecommunication workers and others—whose labor agreements expire this year. The Obama administration and the union executives are frightened by the prospect of the oil strike becoming a catalyst for a broader movement of the working class.

In the face of an anticipated “wages push” by American workers, the corporate and financial elite plan to escalate their war against the working class. They are determined to reduce workers to conditions of industrial slavery and poverty not seen since the 19th century.

As one striking worker in Whiting told the WSWS, “We’re fighting for all workers. I served in the military and I’ve been to many countries—the Philippines, Indonesia, many third world countries. The corporations want to turn this country into a third world country.”

Another said, “This year is going to be a big year for workers to fight back. I guarantee that by 2016, if we don’t have a revolution, we surely will be on the brink of it.”

Workers are looking to break through the sabotage of the unions and mobilize their strength. This requires the building of new organizations of struggle, controlled by rank-and-file workers and completely independent of the pro-company unions and both big-business parties.

The building of such workers’ committees must be accompanied by a new political perspective, based on a break with the two parties of US big business, the building of an independent political movement of the working class, the fight for the international unity of workers, and a socialist program, including the nationalization of the oil industry under the democratic control of the working population.



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