

Striking BP oil workers in Indiana speak out

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As the strike by US oil workers enters its second month, workers at the picket lines in Indiana expressed their determination to press ahead with the fight with the big oil corporations. On February 8, more than 1,000 workers at the BP refinery in Whiting, Indiana, joined the oil strike, which now involves 6,500 workers in Ohio, California, Texas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Indiana and Washington state.

The Whiting workers have manned picket lines during bitterly cold winter weather, as February 2015 tied with February 1875 for the coldest on record. In the face of the intransigence of the oil bosses, many criticized the USW for limiting the strike and have demanded an all-out strike by the 30,000 USW workers employed in the industry.

BP's Whiting refinery, formerly owned by Amoco and Standard Oil, is the largest in the Midwestern United States and the sixth largest in the country. A \$4.2 billion modernization project was completed in 2014 that allowed the refinery to greatly expand the processing of heavier crude oil from North Dakota and Canada.

The refinery is located in a heavily industrialized area of Northwestern Indiana, in the shadows of metropolitan Chicago, though surrounding steel mills and factories have undergone decades of mass layoffs. In fact, the area is a symbol of the treacherous handiwork of the USW, which collaborated, in the name of improving corporate competitiveness and profitability, in the downsizing of the steel industry and the destruction of the jobs and pensions of hundreds of thousands of workers

On the southeast side of the refinery is US Steel's East Chicago Tin Plant, which will be idled in March, laying off 369 USW workers. Arcelor Mittal's Indiana Harbor Steel Mill sits to the east of the Whiting refinery and is the largest integrated steel mill in the US. The company recently announced the closure of a

portion of the mill but claims the jobs will be reassigned within the facility. (See: "Mass layoffs at northwest Indiana steel mills"). US Steel also plans to close its Gary Works coke plant in May, wiping out 300 workers, and marking the end of a coke-making era at the giant steel mill along Lake Michigan that once operated three coke batteries.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers on the picket lines on Sunday, the day after members of the USW bargaining committee sought to justify their partial strike policy at a union rally.

When asked by WSWS reporters why he thought the union hadn't called a national strike, one worker said, "Believe me, that question was asked a 1,000 times last night." Another worker added, "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."

According to the *Chicago Tribune*, USW bargainer Jim Savage said the reason the union had not called out all its members was because it did not want "government intervention in the labor dispute. In other words, the USW wants, at all cost, to avoid a confrontation with the Obama administration, because it would expose the anti-working class character of its alliance with the Democrats, who no less than the Republicans are tools of big business. (See: "Steelworkers union blocks broadening of oil workers' struggle").

From the start, the USW has kept rank-and-file workers in the dark about their closed-door negotiations with the oil companies, which will resume Wednesday, and its high level discussions with the White House, which intervened last month to block a strike by 20,000 West Coast dockworkers.

In 2013, President Obama appointed USW President Leo Gerard to his corporate competitiveness board where, along with Alcoa, Caterpillar, Dow Chemical and other big corporations, the USW president makes

proposals to slash costs in the manufacturing and energy sectors.

Speaking of Leo Gerard's participation in such labor-management-government, a BP worker with 10 years' experience asked, "Which side is [Leo Gerard] on? As far as I am concerned the union is a big business. This isn't like the 1930's anymore, when strikes were really strikes, when workers would block the scabs from entering. Right now, everyone is worried about paying their mortgages."

There are widespread expressions of solidarity with the picketers, including cars honking in support and workers visiting from nearby industrial plants and schools. Tens of thousands of area workers—including those whose contracts are expiring this year at Chicago's Ford assembly plant and the Chicago public schools—are looking to oil workers to push back against decades of eroding living standards and work conditions. The main obstacle to unifying these struggles is the USW and the AFL-CIO.

Workers on the picket lines also spoke on the daily hazards they face in an unsafe, poorly maintained work environment. "I was told to go fix a valve," one worker recalled. "Every ladder had been removed from our department, because it was too expensive to do yearly safety inspections. And there was scaffolding, which was improperly set up, and we had been asking to remove for the past 10 years.

"I fell off, broke five ribs, punctured a lung and shattered a shoulder blade. To this day, that valve is not fixed."

The Whiting facility has seen repeated accidents just in the last year alone. Last March, a leak let between 630 and 1,639 gallons of oil spill into Lake Michigan on a portion of shorefront within the property of the refinery. BP faced no fines for the incident.

In August 2014, an explosion at the refinery shook homes in a neighborhood bordering the plant and released more than 500 pounds of sulfur dioxide in the air. No injuries were reported and the release was said not to have caused any air quality issues.

In the course of the last week alone, there have been more than three major malfunctions reported in the refinery now being run by managers, inexperienced contractors and highly paid strikebreakers. There were two flare-ups and one leak, according to the *Times of Northwest Indiana*, including one on February 23 that

lit up the sky with burning gas for half an hour, workers said.

"BP cuts corners everywhere," a worker pointed out. "Every day we have a pipe leak or an accident. Every day we have some safety issue that is never reported. We tell them about major issues that we can fix, but they won't stop production for one moment to address safety issues.

"We have a pipe that is completely fractured that goes into Lake Michigan that they wrapped in a cast. It's like a Band-Aid on a broken arm. The pipe carries benzene—cancer-causing benzene!—and if this breaks, that's going to leak into the lake."

Oil workers at the Whiting, Indiana, refinery face a grueling work schedule like many across the country, toiling in dictatorial conditions inside the refinery. "We get 'drafted' after eight hours of work by the company. So we work 12 hours or more. I have a son that I'd like to see more but I never get to because of my work schedule.

"We're here fighting for all workers," he noted. "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.

"As far as I see it, the politicians in this country are all corrupt. It's not red and blue, but corporation and worker. That's where the lines fall. 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."



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