

Defend the US oil workers!

Jerry White
5 March 2015

One month into the US oil refinery strike, the oil companies are throwing down the gauntlet before the working class. This is the significance of the announcement Tuesday that global oil giant Royal Dutch Shell will train strikebreakers to resume full production at its plants in Texas and Louisiana.

A letter from Aamir Farid, Shell's vice president of manufacturing, Americas, said the company was shifting from its "contingency plan" to its "business continuity" phase, and training "relief workers" to replace the 800 striking workers at its largest refinery, located in the Houston suburb of Deer Park, Texas. Noting that Shell had "contingency plans in place for all [United Steelworkers] represented sites for well over 12 months," Farid said the refinery would be up to "full rotation" by midsummer.

In plain English: If workers do not agree to accept the dictates of the oil companies, they face the loss of their jobs and destruction of their livelihoods.

The provocative action by Shell—the lead negotiator for ExxonMobil, Chevron, BP and other energy conglomerates—poses the urgent need for a determined and aggressive response by the workers. Without this, the strike will inevitably result in a bitter defeat.

The strike must be expanded to encompass the entire industry. All refineries must be shut down. Delegations of oil workers should be sent to steel mills, auto factories, ports, hospitals, public schools and other workplaces to call for solidarity action, including mass demonstrations and sympathy strikes. An appeal must be made to workers throughout the world who are fighting the same multinational corporations.

To carry out such a struggle, workers must take matters into their own hands. It is necessary to make a sober evaluation of who is on the side of the workers and who is arrayed against them.

On the side of the enemies of the working class stand not only the companies, but also the unions, which

function as the auxiliary agents of corporate management. The intransigence with which the companies have operated has depended entirely on the complicity and cooperation of the United Steelworkers.

The worthlessness of the USW was again demonstrated one day after Shell's announcement. On Wednesday, after a brief conference call that followed weeks of stalled negotiations, the USW issued a groveling statement declaring its hope that "Shell will approach these discussions with an open mind as well."

This after the oil giant made clear its plans to fire striking workers if they do not come back to work on the company's terms!

From the start of the strike, the USW has worked hand-in-glove with the companies to isolate the strike and keep it from having any significant impact on production. The walkout is limited to only 6,500 workers out of the 30,000 USW members in the industry. Reflecting the nationalism of the USW, none of the workers at the largest American-based companies have been called out.

Sitting on a \$350 million strike fund, the USW has refused to pay cash strike benefits. It has instead forced workers to beg the union for grocery cash cards and help on utility bills.

As for the AFL-CIO, it held its executive council meeting last month in the midst of the strike, but took no action to defend the oil workers. The executives who run the unions fear nothing more than a rebellion by workers that would threaten their lucrative relationships with the corporations.

Also standing behind the oil bosses is the government. In its assault on oil workers, the companies are implementing the policy of the corporate and financial aristocracy as a whole, backed by both the Democrats and Republicans.

This policy is being spearheaded by the Obama administration, which has presided over the greatest

transfer of wealth from the working class to the rich in US history. Just last month, it intervened to block a potential strike by 20,000 West Coast dockworkers. The White House is now relying on the USW and other unions to impose its program of wage cutting and shifting the cost of health care and pensions from the employers to workers.

USW officials have justified their emasculation of the strike on the grounds that they want to avoid “federal intervention in the labor dispute.” This is not merely cowardice. The USW is closely allied with the Obama administration and does not want a political confrontation with the White House.

Oil workers have powerful enemies. But they have more powerful allies: the working class as a whole, which has an immense stake in this struggle. The assault on the jobs, wages, benefits and working conditions of oil workers is repeated in innumerable forms throughout the country and internationally.

The situation confronting workers today recalls Reagan’s firing of 11,000 PATCO air traffic controllers in 1981. The isolation and betrayal of that strike by the AFL-CIO paved the way for a decade of union busting, mass layoffs and wage cutting, which marked the beginning of a counteroffensive by the American and international ruling class against workers that continues to this day.

Some five million workers, including teachers, postal workers and workers in the auto and telecommunication industries, have labor agreements expiring this year. The American ruling class is determined to defeat the oil workers before their struggle becomes a catalyst for a broader movement of the working class. Yet this is precisely what is required.

The only way to break the dictatorial hold of the ruling class over society is by mobilizing the working class in a revolutionary movement that is aimed at putting political power into the hands of the vast majority of the population—the masses of working people whose labor produces society’s wealth.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on oil workers to organize rank-and-file committees to take the initiative, broaden the strike, and organize delegations to other sections of the working class. The strike must be developed into a powerful movement of the entire working class against the two-party capitalist system.

We urge workers to contact the WSWS to organize

this struggle and provide the necessary political leadership to take it forward.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact