

As impasse continues, USW blocks wider strike by oil workers

Jerry White, Alan Gilman
10 March 2015

The strike by oil workers in the United States has entered its sixth week, with the energy conglomerates remaining steadfast against workers' demands for improved living standards, safety and work conditions. Although rank-and-file workers are demanding an all-out strike, the United Steelworkers union continues to restrict the walkout to a small number of refineries and only 6,500 out of the 30,000 USW workers in the oil industry.

Talks between the USW and lead industry bargainer Shell—which resumed Monday after having broken down for nearly two weeks—have gone nowhere. All negotiations are taking place behind the backs of workers. The USW sent out a terse text message Monday night reading, “Parties talking and bargaining continues tomorrow. Slow progress. Stay united and strong.”

The USW has not targeted any of the largest US-owned companies, such as ExxonMobil and Chevron. Facing a largely ineffectual strike, the oil giants do not have slightest incentive to seriously bargain. Instead, they are counting on the USW to starve out striking workers, who receive few if any benefits from the union's \$350 million strike fund, and condition them to accept another sellout agreement.

The crippling of the strike by the USW has only emboldened the oil companies. Last week, Shell announced it was moving from its “contingency” to its “business continuity” stage and would fully replace striking workers at its Deer Park, Texas and Louisiana refineries by midsummer if they did not return to work.

Well aware of the growing frustration of workers, the USW continues to suggest it is just waiting for the right moment to expand the strike. On the eve of Monday's talks, the USW sent a text message to strikers saying, “Units already on strike—stay strong; units still working

on 24hr extensions—be ready to join the ULP (Unfair Labor Practices) strike if called upon.”

In reality, the USW is deliberately crippling the strike because it is allied with the corporations and the Obama administration. The White House has made the relentless driving down of wages, the shifting of health care and pension costs onto workers' backs and the expansion of all forms of casual labor the centerpiece of its so-called “economic recovery.” Both big-business parties and their servants in the trade union bureaucracy are well aware that a breakthrough by oil workers could trigger a far broader movement of the working class against the corporate and financial elite, which since the crash of 2008 has benefited from the greatest transfer of wealth in history.

A reporting team from the *World Socialist Web Site* visited the massive Tesoro refinery in Carson, California, near Los Angeles on Monday. All day long truckers honked their horns and other workers expressed their solidarity with the strikers in an area where 20,000 dockworkers and 40,000 Los Angeles teachers have suffered from years of eroding wages and work conditions.

A US postal worker delivering mail to the refinery stopped to speak to pickets. He told the WSWS that the 200,000 USPS workers coming up for a contract renewal later this year were anxious to recoup past concessions granted by their unions, including the establishment of a tier of low-paid young workers.

One striking Tesoro worker said, “Much of our frustration lays with Big Oil. Before Tesoro bought our plant, its stock was selling at \$14 a share. About one week before the sale was announced publicly, its stock suddenly rose to \$30, meaning a lot of money was made through inside trading. Now Tesoro's stock is in the nineties. They are making billions and clearly have

the financial ability to resolve our issues. It comes to profits over safety. Their refusal is simply a matter of pure corporate greed.”

David Peterson, a maintenance machinist with eight years, said, “I do not know why they [the USW] do not take everyone out. That is the only way we are going to get some results, and it would be a lot quicker than what we got going on right now.

“I thought when this started the union was going to take out workers at all of the refineries and that would show the effectiveness of the union and what we can do to keep these companies from running.”

Captain Pierson of the Los Angeles Fire Department, Station 36, located directly across the street from the refinery, also spoke with the WSWS. “I have been informed that most of their fire brigade is on the picket line. Typically in the past when we have had incidents we have worked closely with them to mitigate the incident. If there is an incident now, the Los Angeles County Fire Department will have to handle it without their assistance.”

The captain also talked about the assault on public sector workers’ pensions in California. “They have been going after our pensions for years.”

Greg Reid, an oil refinery operator with 30 years in the industry, said, “We [labor] have been taking a beating for quite awhile. If they could, they would knock us down to half of what we are making.

“My uncle was a PATCO air traffic controller who was fired by Reagan in the 1981 strike. The federal government replaced the strikers with the military, and my uncle was blackballed by the federal government and has been relegated to doing handyman work. This is supposed to be a free country, but they are trying to wipe out the labor laws that were written in the ‘30s as part of the New Deal, including the minimum wage, Social Security, unemployment insurance, disability.

“They are basically trying to erase those laws like they do not exist, all the laws that were fought for by the unions. Now is the time to fight back. If you do not fight now you are only going to get what they are going to give you—and that will not be much.”

Soto, another operator with 22 years experience, added, “The situation is that we got to stand up and fight, especially dealing with Tesoro. If we do not stand up and fight then why even strike?

“The younger generation does not understand the

fight. So we are trying to incorporate that into this because we need this younger generation to step up to say we need to fight for something also.

“They want to bring in anybody that they think can do the job, and do it for lower pay, without pension, without health care, without any benefits for the company to pay. This is the time to fight because this is the way the whole industry is going, the whole United States. They are doing this because it is beneficial for those big companies to make money from you and me.”

Striking workers discussed a broad array of political issues with WSWS supporters. Several noted that the same giant oil companies attacking workers were the greatest beneficiaries of the war in Iraq. One worker skeptically said Bush had said the war was for “WMDs” and readily agreed with a reporter’s comment that it was really for “O-I-L.”

There was great interest in the Socialist Equality Party’s statement, “The way forward for oil workers,” which calls on workers to break the USW’s isolation of the strike by forming rank-and-file action committees to take over the conduct of the struggle while fighting for the fullest political mobilization of the entire working class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact