USW union sabotages support for striking US oil workers

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There is widespread sympathy in the working class for the embattled oil workers who have been on strike for more than five weeks against some of the largest and most politically-connected corporations in the world. The issues animating oil workers—the fight against the casualization of labor, eroding wages and health benefits, long work hours and unsafe conditions—resonate among tens of millions of working people in the US and internationally.

In discussion with oil workers, the sentiment that arises again and again is: the entire industry should be on strike. In speaking to auto workers, steelworkers, dockworkers and other sections of the working class, the WSWS has encountered widespread sympathy.

The principal obstacles to mobilizing the working class behind the oil workers are the trade unions. The United Steelworkers continues to defy rank-and-file demands for an all-out strike, while restricting the walkout to a small fraction of USW workers in the oil industry. The AFL-CIO meanwhile, has done everything it can to isolate the refinery workers. Indeed, these organizations should not be called "unions," since their function is not to unite, but to divide the working class.

This has only emboldened the oil giants, which have refused to bargain seriously and have hired "relief workers" to break the strike.

With utter cynicism, the USW claims this disastrous policy is leading to progress in its secret negotiations with the oil companies. In a terse text message to striking workers Tuesday night, the USW said, "Bargaining is moving along. Industry needs to close the gaps and end the strike or see it expand. Stay tough."

The USW has sought to impose a "gag order" on striking workers to prevent their voices from being heard. It has concentrated its energy not on defending workers against strikebreaking by the energy conglomerates, but on threatening and harassing reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site*, which has fought to expand the strike and mobilize the working class behind the struggle.

On Tuesday, officials from USW Local 675 in Carson, California demanded that WSWS reporters leave "union property" and tried to prevent them from distributing the Socialist Equality Party statement,"The way forward for oil workers."

The day before, workers on the picket lines at the Tesoro Carson refinery who had discussed the statement with WSWS reporters urged them to attend the union meeting. Outside the meeting, workers gladly took the SEP statement, with one worker associating the threat to break the oil workers' strike with Reagan's firing of the PATCO air traffic controllers in 1981. This was before a "welcoming committee" from the union apparatus came to prevent further discussion.

The incident followed similar harassment in Norco, Louisiana on Saturday, March 7, when an official who identified himself as the president of USW Local 750 ordered WSWS reporters off of the picket lines at the Motiva Enterprises refinery, telling them they had "better be careful."

The Norco refinery is one of the locations where Shell has threatened to fully replace striking workers. The potential to mobilize broader support for the strikers was highlighted by a walkout over wages last Friday by 1,000 non-union contractors building a Liquid Natural Gas facility in Cameron Parish on the Louisiana-Texas border.

In discussions with striking oil workers from California, Texas and the state of Washington to Indiana, Ohio and Kentucky, the *World Socialist Web*

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Site has received widespread support for its call for a national strike and a campaign to mobilize the broader sections of workers behind this struggle.

Oil workers from around the US have also subscribed to the daily WSWS *Oil Workers Newsletter*. The comment of one Tesoro worker who signed up expressed widespread anger over the crippling of the strike by the USW. "From what I've seen in this strike, the question I have had from the very beginning is, if we are fighting the good fight and we are such a strong union, then why aren't all locals that are operating on a rolling 24-hour contract out on the firing line with us?

"The heads of the union are cashing in for their own personal gain and falling victim to the Obama administration. I voted for Obama but it hasn't done any good … in the time he's been in office he has also fallen victim to corporate greed and Big Oil … If these greedy Big Oil CEOs and politicians can't do what they said and swore they would do … then they should get the hell out."

In the face of a virtual news blackout by the corporate-controlled media and deliberate sabotage by the USW and other unions, the WSWS has brought news of the strike to the working class as a whole.

On Tuesday, WSWS reporters spoke with dockworkers at the Port of Long Beach. Like the oil companies, the shipping and terminal operators have vastly expanded the use of lower paid workers with no pensions or health care benefits. This attack has been sanctioned by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which, like the USW, has collaborated with the employers to cut costs and drastically increase productivity.

After forcing workers to labor without a contract for nine months, the ILWU allowed the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) to lock out 20,000 West Coast dockers. Rather than call a walkout, the ILWU capitulated to the Obama administration, which intervened to block a potential strike that would have immeasurably strengthened the fight of the oil workers. The ILWU agreed to a supposed contract, which has never materialized.

One young worker told the WSWS, "We are casual workers, we get no benefits and we don't even know if we'll be working tomorrow. On my ID card I'm called an 'Unidentified Longshoreman.' I've been a casual for 11 years and want a full-time job, but it's hard to move up.

"My father has been a longshoreman for more than four decades, and he says the younger workers will never see the conditions he did. It's going backward. I've got a buddy that works at the Chevron refinery who says he's got to work 18-hour shifts. I support the oil workers."

A full-time worker said, "The ILWU is nothing but a business. They have not even put together a contract; it was nothing but a handshake, and we might not see it for another three or four months. The PMA locked us out last month and it cost us a lot of lost wages. It's all about greed. The people with the money want to keep it. It does not matter if you have a Republican or a Democrat in there."

Another casual worker with 11 years' service said, "None of these companies want to hire full-time workers and pay us benefits. We risk our lives at these jobs in the hope of a full-time job that they dangle in front of us. I used to work in the airlines and got good money. They laid us off and got 'independent' workers with low pay and no benefits."

At this section of the port, workers reported more than half of the employees were casualized. Within a few minutes, harbor security guards came to tell the WSWS reporters they had to leave. Pointing out that the parking lot said this property belonged to the ILWU, the guards said it was the ILWU that was in charge of security and had ordered the reporters to leave.

Before leaving, the reporters spoke to one last casual worker. "I understand what the oil workers are going through, working so much overtime, lacking sleep and facing dangers. I was a temporary worker at a refinery, and I worked 12-hour shifts. This started with Reagan and his 'trickle down' economics. Obama is no different; he's just a puppet. Workers have to come together to fight back."

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