

Reject USW-Shell sellout deal!

For a general strike to defend jobs, safety and living standards!

Jerry White
16 March 2015

Oil workers must organize now to defeat the sellout contract the United Steelworkers union (USW) is seeking to steamroll them into accepting on behalf of the oil corporations and the Obama administration. If implemented, the four-year deal would give the oil bosses a free hand to continue destroying the jobs, work conditions and livelihoods of tens of thousands of current and future workers in the industry. This must be stopped.

The determination of oil workers to resist the dictates of the corporations represents the beginning of the re-emergence of a movement of the working class in the US, after decades in which the unions have suppressed the class struggle even as corporate profits, executive pay and the stock market hit record levels. Oil workers have the sympathy and support of millions of workers throughout the country and internationally. This support must be mobilized and given conscious political expression.

Rank-and-file committees at every refinery should be elected to campaign for a “no” vote and to take the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the USW. Delegations of striking workers should go to every working refinery, chemical plant and other oil facility to call out workers for an all-out strike by workers in the industry.

At the same time, appeals should be made to workers and young people for a general strike, linking up the fight of oil workers with the struggle of the whole working class against the destruction of jobs and work conditions, social inequality, police brutality, the attack on democratic rights and the threat of war.

It must be stated bluntly: The agreement the USW is seeking to ram through is rotten to the core. The claim by USW President Leo Gerard that oil workers “won vast improvements in safety and staffing” is a blatant lie. More honest were the comments of BP Fuels North America

Chief Operations Officer Doug Sparkman who gloated in a letter to fellow executives that the agreement “preserves the industry’s flexibility to utilize contractors and set staffing levels.” He further boasted that workers would be locked into this deal for four years, instead of the traditional three.

As for the grueling work schedules oil workers face, according to Shell the agreement establishes provisions “to meet semiannually to review site practices related to fatigue.” In regard to contractors, the deal “provides opportunities for local discussion by the parties on the future supply and development of craft workers.”

Industry analysts immediately dismissed these provisions as a meaningless “face saving” gestures. Lee Medley, president of the United Steelworkers Local 13-1 in Houston, admitted there were no restrictions on forced overtime or contracting, but told the *Houston Chronicle* that he hoped the companies would be sincere and progress could be made on excessive overtime.

Does the USW think workers are fools? The oil giants have made their vast profits—\$90 billion for the top five companies last year alone—precisely by working oil workers to the bone and shifting work to lower-paid contractors with no job security, health care or pensions. ExxonMobil, BP, Chevron and the other conglomerates have no intention of letting up no matter how many phony labor-management committees are set up. Moreover, workers have long experience with “partnership” committees that, while providing lucrative careers for USW bureaucrats, never did a thing to stop the horrible disasters at Texas City or Anacortes, Washington.

To add insult to injury, the deal includes raises that barely keep up with the rate of inflation and maintains out-of-pocket health care costs that chew up paychecks. In addition, workers will face being dumped into inferior

medical plans as the unions and companies implement Obama's penalties for "Cadillac" insurance coverage in 2017.

Such a miserable outcome is not why workers walked on the picket lines for weeks and sacrificed their paychecks and health benefits. From the outset, however, the USW bargained not for workers but to preserve the bloated salaries of the union executives and their cozy relationships with the oil companies and big business politicians.

The USW only called the strike to allow the rank-and-file to blow off steam. It then proceeded to castrate the struggle by limiting the strike to only 6,500 out of the 30,000 USW workers. The "union" ordered the majority of oil workers to continue laboring and making profits for the oil giants while their brothers and sisters on the picket lines were being put on starvation rations by the USW, which wanted to keep intact as much of its \$350 million strike fund as it could.

The USW is now rushing to ram through contract votes at various locals in order to isolate striking workers at Tesoro, LyondellBasell, Marathon, BP and Shell. Once again, the USW has handed the initiative to the companies on a silver platter. Management knows it can now make even more onerous demands on local workforces, like the five-year contract to separate workers at ExxonMobil in Beaumont, Texas from the rest of the national agreement.

Any section of workers who resist will be isolated and betrayed by the USW in the face of company threats that they will be replaced with "relief workers."

From the beginning, the overriding concern of the USW was to prevent the struggle from developing into a political confrontation with the Obama administration, with which the USW has the closest ties. USW President Leo Gerard sits on Obama's corporate competitiveness board along with CEOs from Caterpillar and other companies that have savagely slashed wages.

With growing demands from rank-and-file workers for a national oil strike, the USW and the AFL-CIO feared they could lose control of the struggle and that it could develop into a broader mobilization of the working class.

Oil workers no doubt face powerful enemies—some of the richest and most powerful monopolies on the planet, a corporate-controlled news media and bought-and-paid-for politicians and pro-company servants like Gerard, Beevers & Co. But workers have far more powerful allies in the working class throughout the United States and internationally who are facing the same struggle against a capitalist system that enriches the few at the expense of

the many.

The biggest obstacles to such a struggle are the anti-working class trade unions. Rank-and-file oil workers must take the conduct of the fight out of the hands of the USW and build new organizations of struggle, independent of the pro-company unions and both big business parties.

In opposition to the USW's slavish defense of the capitalist system, workers should adopt the principle that they have social rights—to a safe and decent paying job, to health care, pensions and future for the next generation—that must take precedence over the profits of the richest one percent. This requires a *political fight* by the working class to throw out the corporate-controlled government and establish the democratic control of society by the working class.

The global energy industry can no longer be the private property of billionaires who launch criminal wars, destroy the planet and exploit the working class to boost their bottom line. Instead, the industry must be transformed into a public utility, democratically controlled by the working people whose labor produces society's wealth, and run on the basis of human need, not private profit.

From the beginning the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* have been the only political forces fighting the betrayal of the USW and to mobilize the full strength of oil workers and the working class as a whole. We urge oil workers who want to defeat this sellout to contact the WSWS to take this fight forward.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact