

The oil workers' strike and the return of the class struggle in the US

Jerry White
17 March 2015

The month-and-a-half strike by oil workers in the United States has demonstrated once again that the essential driving force of social and political development in the US, like the rest of the world, is the class struggle.

Despite musings about the “disappearance of the working class” and the obsessive fixation with race and gender in upper-middle class academic circles, capitalist society, in the famous words of Karl Marx, is split “into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other—Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.”

The struggle has pitted 30,000 oil workers against some of the richest and most politically connected corporations in the world: the energy conglomerates, which buy and sell governments, order the launching of wars and military coups, and pollute the planet with impunity.

Driven solely by profit considerations, Shell, ExxonMobil, BP, Chevron and the other companies neglect infrastructure repairs, refuse to hire full-time workers and exploit the present workforce to the point of exhaustion, indifferent to the resulting explosions, fires and environmental damage.

Tens of millions of workers in the US and around the world—who have suffered eroding living standards even as corporate profits and stock prices have hit record highs—support the fight of the oil workers. Once again, however, the greatest obstacle to the unification of the working class has proven to be the pro-capitalist and nationalist trade unions, which have sought to sabotage the strike and are now working to impose the dictates of corporate management and the Obama administration.

From the beginning, the United Steelworkers union (USW) sought deliberately to ensure the strike's defeat.

The USW limited the strike to a small fraction of the workers it represents in the industry, although USW workers have the power to shut down two-thirds of the refinery capacity in the US. It isolated striking workers even as Shell executives announced that they would replace them with “relief workers.” The union joined the effort to starve workers into submission by withholding any significant aid from its \$350 million strike fund.

Finally, last week, the USW agreed to a supposed “contract” that is an insult to the workers who have manned picket lines, in some cases in the freezing cold, for more than six weeks. Worthless promises from management to provide the union with “opportunities for discussion” on fatigue issues and contracting out work were palmed off by USW President Leo Gerard as “vast improvements in safety and staffing.” By demobilizing most of the unionized workers, the USW has left workers continuing the strike at BP, Tesoro and Marathon to fight alone.

Once again, workers have been confronted with the brick wall known as the American “labor movement.” As in so many struggles over the last five years—the Indianapolis GM workers, Wisconsin public sector workers, Verizon workers, Chicago teachers, Illinois Caterpillar workers, Findlay, Ohio Cooper Tire workers, New York City school bus drivers, West Coast dockworkers, to name a few—the impasse confronting the oil strike is not due to any lack of determination on the part of the workers. In every case, the enormous potential revealed in these struggles was systematically undermined and smothered by the AFL-CIO and other unions.

The great impulse for the mass industrial organization of the American working class was the victory of the Russian Revolution, which provided an immense

impetus to the class struggle internationally. In the 1930s, the US saw insurrectionary class battles that led to the formation of the industrial unions. Under conditions of revolutionary upheaval, the ruling class responded by implementing certain social reforms—an effort to “save capitalism from itself.”

The newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), however, remained subordinate to the Democratic Party. The alliance with this capitalist party meant the abandonment of any fight for a fundamental change in social relations, and the new unions quickly made their peace with American capitalism. This was cemented by the postwar anticommunist purge of the socialist pioneers who had built the industrial unions. The merger of the AFL and the CIO in 1955 marked the repudiation of any radical social struggle.

The period of social reform—which Walter Reuther and other union leaders claimed would last forever—proved to be short-lived. By the late 1970s, facing the loss of its economic hegemony, the US corporate and financial elite shifted its policy from class compromise to class war. President Reagan’s firing of the PATCO air traffic controllers in 1981 initiated a period of social counterrevolution, pursued by both big-business parties, which continues to this day.

The anti-working class alliance between the unions and the Democratic Party has been on display in the oil workers’ strike. From the beginning, the USW was determined to prevent the struggle from escalating into a political confrontation with the Obama administration, with which the USW has the closest relations. USW President Leo Gerard sits on Obama’s Advanced Manufacturing Partnership committee, where he conspires with the CEOs from Alcoa, Caterpillar and other Fortune 500 companies to lower wages and pension and health care costs in order to “in-source” production from China, Mexico and other low-wage countries.

The role of the unions is a product not simply of the corruption of individual leaders, though of this there is plenty. The transformation of the trade unions into direct tools of the corporations and the government is the product of a decades-long degeneration, rooted in powerful objective changes in the structure of the world economy. These transformations have rendered the

nationally based and pro-capitalist trade unions obsolete and in fact reactionary.

The global integration of capitalist production was the final nail in the coffin for the nationally based trade unions in the US and around the world. In every country, the unions have abandoned any defense of workers’ interests and overseen the relentless destruction of wages, benefits and working conditions.

The oil workers’ strike is a harbinger for the reemergence of open class conflict in America after decades in which the trade unions suppressed it. There is growing determination among tens of millions of workers to reverse years of declining living standards.

To unleash the social power of the working class, it is necessary first of all to throw off the dead weight of the pro-company trade unions. New organizations, led by the most self-sacrificing and militant workers and democratically controlled by the workers themselves, must be built to spearhead a counteroffensive by the working class. This must involve far wider sections of workers, including the vast majority who are not in unions and the tens of millions of immigrant and unemployed workers.

At the same time, there must be an understanding that workers face not a trade union struggle, but a *political struggle* against an economic and political system—capitalism—that operates on a world scale. The fight to defend the social rights of working people—to decent-paying and safe jobs, economic security, health care, education and a future for the next generation—pits workers directly against the two parties of big business and the bankrupt profit system they defend.

Nowhere does the necessity for socialism and economic planning reveal itself more clearly than in the global energy industry. If social needs, including the health and well-being of oil workers, are to take precedence over the single-minded drive for profit, the industry must be nationalized under the democratic control of working people, as part of a socialist planned economy in the US and internationally.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact