

Australian workers call for support for striking US oil workers

Our correspondents
17 March 2015

Workers and young people interviewed in Sydney and the nearby Central Coast last weekend backed the six-week strike by US oil refinery workers against the ongoing destruction of their jobs, conditions and living standards, and condemned the efforts of the United Steelworkers (USW) trade union to push through a sellout agreement with the giant global oil companies.

World Socialist Web Site correspondents spoke to working people as the USW began trying to ram through votes on four-year concessionary contracts at individual local union branches in order to isolate the workers who are still striking at BP, Shell, Tesoro, LyondellBasell and Marathon refineries.

If implemented, the four-year deal would allow the oil bosses to keep bringing in contractors to replace full-time workers, cutting staffing levels and ordering forced overtime, while imposing wage rises that barely keep pace with inflation. To supervise this betrayal, union-management committees would be established that provide lucrative careers for USW bureaucrats.

As the WWSW has explained, the US oil workers' strike is of crucial significance for workers worldwide: "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."

Like the trade unions in Australia, the USW has done everything it can to undermine the struggle of its members, limiting the strike to just 12 refineries, accounting for one fifth of US oil production, and only 6,500 out of the 30,000 USW workers. While the oil conglomerates continued to make massive profits (\$90 billion last year for the five biggest companies alone), striking workers were put on starvation rations by the

union, which has held onto its members' \$350 million strike fund.

Luke, a 38-year-old plant operator, met Noel Holt, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidate for Wyong in the March 28 New South Wales (NSW) state election, at the Lake Haven shopping centre. Luke was particularly outraged by the role being played by the USW in the oil refinery strike.

"It's not right," Luke said. "I don't agree with how the union is treating its members. It's not right that the union calls them out, then only pays them food vouchers and utility bills while it has a \$350 million strike fund. Why didn't the union call all its 30,000 members out? It sucks!"

Luke said the trade unions played a similar role in Australia and elsewhere. "As a plant operator I work on big constructions, such as motorways, and my union, the CFMEU [Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union], isn't any better. They are supposed to be left and radical but they never resolve any of the problems of the workers or any of the issues that we have had with our boss."

In the outer-western Sydney suburb of Penrith, Carolyn Kennett, the SEP candidate for the local electorate in the NSW election, met **Kathryn** and **Caitlin**, both 20-year-old workers. Neither had heard of the oil workers' strike, because of the virtual blackout imposed on it by the mass media and the trade unions in Australia.

Kathryn commented: "It is pretty shocking that it is not an issue and has not been raised. It does affect us... They [the media] are trying to hide the wrongdoings that they are doing to their workers. If they showed us, people would put their hands up to say that it is not right and they would have a backlash."

Asked about the calls by business groups for

Australia's minimum wage to be halved, to bring it into line with American levels, Kathryn declared: "People are not going to be able to feed their children. You are working your guts out, and no one cares. No one says 'We appreciate your struggle. We know you work all the time.' Instead, they say 'Gen Y is lazy.' It's a joke. I have been working since I was 16."

Caitlin, who has been working since she was 14, added: "That's ridiculous. That's impossible for people to live on." Asked about the role of the trade unions, Caitlin said: "They really don't care about the workers. They see them as disposable."

In the south-western Sydney suburb of Bankstown, where the SEP is standing Oscar Grenfell as its candidate, an SEP campaign team met **Ghazi**, who worked for many years at Presto Meats, which later became Primo Meats, before being forced to retire after chopping a piece off one of his fingers.

Ghazi insisted: "Everyone is affected by the same issues as the US oil workers, aren't they? If we lose our jobs, we cannot raise our kids, so we have to support them [the American oil workers]. We all have to support each other."

The veteran worker said both the oil and meat industries are being restructured by transnational corporations. Referring to the recent closures of the two oil refineries in Sydney—the Caltex plant at Kurnell and the Shell complex at Clyde—Ghazi said: "We all face the same problem. Technology comes in and the companies kick all the workers out and get automatic machines to do the work for them."

At Primo Meats, which was last year acquired by Brazilian conglomerate JBS Swift, "every machine is replacing four or five people who used to work at the sausage making tables." Ghazi explained: "Some people have to operate two or three machines, which is dangerous because how can you control it if you have to run there and there? You go mad. You get accidents because you hit yourself, and the companies do not care. All they care about is money, money. There is nothing for safety, nothing."

Ghazi said the isolation of the US oil workers by their union was also similar to what happened in Australia. "If you are a worker, you have no support from anyone else. The employers push you, and if you don't like, you go home. There's no union to support you... There's no [union] delegates, nobody."

John, in **Bankstown**, the Barangaroo site in Sydney, had not heard of the US oil workers' strike. His site is one of the biggest building projects in Australia, currently employing more than 2,500 workers, but union covering the project, the CFMEU, has not informed them of the American struggle.

Large companies increasingly dominate the construction industry, as they do the oil industry. John said Lend Lease, which operates the Barangaroo project, "push it back on to their workers to work harder... They bought out the three largest companies in Australia and now there are only two main ones, Lend Lease and Leighton."

John agreed with the SEP's position that the working class needs an international strategy and that Australian workers must come to the defence of American workers and vice versa. "That's pretty good," he commented. "Well, I'll give you my vote."

The SEP's campaign in the NSW election is aimed at building a new revolutionary leadership based on an internationalist and socialist perspective. We urge our readers to study our election statement and come to the party's final election rally in Sydney this Sunday.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact