

USW isolates remaining oil worker strikes

Jerry White
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Oil workers continue to walk the picket lines at refineries and petrochemical plants across the US, despite the efforts of the United Steelworkers (USW) union to shut down the month-and-a-half long strike and impose pro-company contracts on 30,000 workers in the US oil industry.

The USW approved a four-year deal with lead bargainer Shell last week that commits the companies to absolutely nothing regarding safety, excessive overtime and the contracting out of work. Facing growing opposition from rank-and-file workers to its selective strike policy—which kept fourth-fifths of the USW workforce on the job—the USW agreed to worthless promises by the companies to hold semi-annual meetings and “organize discussions” on these issues.

Under the national agreement, USW spokeswoman Lynne Hancock acknowledged earlier this week, the oil companies will retain final say over staffing levels.

The USW also accepted wage increases that barely keep up with inflation and allowed the hugely profitable companies to continue to impose high out-of-pocket health care costs that further erode workers’ living standards.

According to the union’s convoluted ratification process, local unions must now negotiate contracts with the local management at 100 USW-represented oil facilities across the country. Workers at each local must ratify the new contracts, which are supposed to be in line with the agreement reached with Shell.

According to a report in the *Northwest Indiana Times*, only 20 of the 100 locations have come to terms with management.

The USW is now seeking to ram through its sellout on 800 workers at refineries and chemical plants in Norco and Convent, Louisiana, which are owned by Motiva Enterprises, a joint venture between Shell and the Saudi Refinery Co. Earlier this month, Shell

announced that it would replace strikers at its Louisiana and Texas facilities with “relief workers” if the walkout continued. Workers voted on Monday and Tuesday, with results expected today.

Meanwhile, workers continue to strike at Tesoro plants in California and Washington state; Marathon facilities in Texas and Kentucky; BP refineries in Ohio and Indiana; a LyondellBasell refinery in the Houston area; and facilities owned or co-owned by Shell in Deer Park and Port Arthur, Texas.

Although the USW claimed Tuesday night that Tesoro units “resolved most issues,” the union acknowledged that “tough local issues” remained at BP, Marathon and LyondellBasell. Only last week USW District 7 director Mike Millsap accused BP of trying to strip away the union’s ability to collectively bargain. After talks stalled last Friday in the first negotiations since the strike began, USW Local 7-1 president Dave Danko told the *Chicago Tribune*, “We’re disappointed, but we’re struggling with the attempted denigration of our bargaining rights.”

The oil companies have the incentive to demand even more onerous concessions in the local contracts than those included in the national agreement. The USW has proven that it will not call out all 30,000 workers in a national strike and will systematically isolate and starve out any section of workers who resist management’s demands.

The world’s largest oil company, ExxonMobil, is demanding a new five-year agreement as a precondition to expand its Beaumont, Texas refinery. Such a deal would cut off local workers from the rest of the workers in the industry, making them susceptible to never ending demands for further concessions. “It’s definitely being orchestrated behind the back of workers,” one Beaumont worker told the WSW. “I’ve come to the realization that my employer is just a notch below ISIS. And the USW is sleeping with them.”

After the announcement of the USW-Shell deal, Doug Sparkman, chief operating officer for BP's Fuels North America, boasted that the agreement "preserves the industry's flexibility to utilize contractors and set staffing levels." He added that BP had "significant local issues that must be resolved at each site, and we hope the same spirit of collaboration and good-faith negotiation that saw a national pattern agreement reached will carry into our local bargaining talks."

Sparkman added that he looked forward to negotiating with the USW at the Whiting and Toledo facilities with the goal of keeping the facilities "competitive."

The Obama administration has reportedly dispatched a federal mediator to oversee talks at Marathon and LyondellBasell, essentially giving the USW its marching orders to wrap up the strike and impose management's demands. The USW, which enjoys close ties to the administration, needs little incentive, having long served as a tool of corporate management.

On the picket lines at BP-Husky near Toledo, Ohio workers expressed determination to fight and suspicion over the deal signed by the USW. One striker with seven years in the industry, said, "We are taking on giants and hopefully we aren't going back with nothing. We took a stand, sometimes in subfreezing weather, for a cause."

"Now we're taking a gamble on the word of the company," he added. "But the auto companies and all of these other companies are demanding workers accept less pay and benefits. I know guys with college degrees making \$30,000 a year. You might as well work at Arby's or another fast food restaurant."

"Next up after us are going to be the auto workers, and they want to go after the wages they lost when the economy was down. It doesn't matter if you have a Republican or Democrat in there, they all defend the corporations. Someone has to take a stand."

Another worker said, "Everyone is working for lower and lower wages. The companies are making billions, and the government keeps shelling money to the banks. It's going back to the 1920s and the 1930s when people had to fight for the right to an eight-hour day and the right to leave the assembly line to use the bathroom so they wouldn't have to wear a diaper."

"They say they want to make the economy better, but how is that going to happen when workers can't buy

cars with the wages they get? You got college kids with a total of \$1.2 trillion in debt who went to school for jobs they can't get.

"These negotiations are a fraud; it's like the hand puppets on the show 'South Park,' where they say a lot, go through the motions and don't do a damn thing. I had to beg the union for help while we were on strike because they didn't give us any strike benefits. You can't say these companies—that were paying \$110 an hour for strikebreakers—had an epiphany and suddenly decided to give us a fair contract."

"The union never called out the whole industry. It was for show."



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