

International Socialist Organization hails USW backstabbing of oil workers' strike

Jerry White, Kevin Reed
20 March 2015

The International Socialist Organization has dispatched its leading apologist for the trade union bureaucracy to cover up for the betrayal of the US oil workers' strike by the United Steelworkers union (USW). The March 18 article by Lee Sustar, titled "Holding the line against Big Oil," takes the cake for mendacity, even from someone who has made a career of deceiving the working class.

In most of his articles, Sustar usually points out the supposed "contradictions" of the policies of the trade unions. He invariably presents their attacks on the working class as "mistakes" or "miscalculations," which can be corrected with sufficient pressure from below. The one constant of his sophistry is that workers must not challenge the authority of the pro-company unions and under no circumstances break from them.

In the case of the oil workers' strike, Sustar does not even pretend to offer a criticism of the USW, which from the beginning of the strike on February 1 has sabotaged the struggle and collaborated with the Obama administration to prevent it from becoming a catalyst for a far wider movement of the working class.

The USW called out only a small fraction of the 30,000 workers in the industry it represents and then systematically sought to starve them into submission by depriving workers of strike benefits. After more than six weeks of the strike, the USW signed a sellout deal with lead industry bargainer Shell, which abandoned workers demands for improved safety and living standards. It is now isolating 4,000 workers who remain on strike at BP, Tesoro, Marathon and LyondellBasell, which responded to the USW deal with even more draconian demands in local contracts.

If such a "strategy" had been written up in the Houston boardrooms of the oil giants it could not have worked out better for them. Yet Sustar begins his article by claiming, "On the main questions, the union held its ground, winning modest pay increases, preserving an 80

percent/20 percent health care cost-sharing formula, and forcing management to negotiate with the union over staffing levels and outsourcing, rather than simply imposing them. At a time when unions are retreating on these issues, the oil workers have held the line against some of the world's most powerful corporations."

In fact the so-called "contract" signed by the USW upholds the corporations' unchallenged right to impose dangerous levels of overtime and replace full-time union workers with contractors. The deal includes a meager 12 percent raise over four years, which hardly keeps up with the rate of inflation. It allows the oil companies, which are making billions, to continue shifting the cost of health care onto the backs of workers.

Sustar is not unaware of this. Rather, the ISO shares the same contempt for the working class as the upper-middle-class union executives whose betrayals have gained them lucrative positions on labor-management committees and seats on Obama's corporate cost-cutting boards.

In a slight nod to the thousands of oil workers who have demanded an all-out strike, Sustar writes, "Having gone on strike in just part of the industry—a move that USW leaders claimed was necessary to avoid government intervention—the union gave up some of its leverage. Now it will be up to USW locals to turn the pattern agreement into acceptable contract language."

While promoting the lie that local union officials will somehow "correct" the national agreement signed by the USW, Sustar essentially endorses the union's cowardly and self-serving justification for not calling a national strike. Like the USW, the ISO is opposed to a broader mobilization of oil workers that would lead to a political confrontation with President Obama, who, along with his attacks on workers and warmongering abroad, has utilized the services of the unions and various proponents of identity and other pseudo-left politics.

Much of Sustar's article is a glorification of the unions,

which he promotes with chummy talk about “labor solidarity” while concealing the actual record of the USW and other unions. This is aimed at maintaining the myth that the unions are “workers organizations,” even after decades of betrayed strikes, labor-management collusion and the disastrous subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party and the interests of American imperialism.

Describing the inside of the USW Local 7-1 union hall in Whiting, Indiana, where 1,100 workers have walked the picket lines at the BP refinery since February 8, Sustar writes, “Overhead are handwritten statements of solidarity from the Chicago Teachers Union and low-wage workers from that city’s Fight for 15 campaign. A placard from Chicago-based International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 134 is full of signatures from members. This is what a well-run strike looks like.”

These empty gestures of “solidarity” were in fact accompanied by the systematic isolation of the strike, by the USW and the AFL-CIO as a whole. There was no attempt to mobilize broader sections of the working class behind the oil workers. On the contrary, the unions collaborated with the Obama administration in blocking a struggle of dock workers that developed at the same time as the oil workers’ struggle.

The only “solidarity” that Sustar is concerned with is the collaboration of the various union bureaucracies against the danger of a rebellion by rank-and-file workers.

The reference to the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) is significant because ISO leader Jesse Sharkey is the CTU vice president. He played a leading role in betraying the strike by 35,000 teachers in 2012, which paved the way for the closing of 50 schools. After preventing that strike from developing into a political confrontation with the Obama administration, Sharkey is currently promoting Democratic Party politician Chuy Garcia for mayor of Chicago.

It is noteworthy that while the USW local officials rolled out the red carpet for Sustar at the Whiting union hall, they waged a systematic campaign of harassment and threats against the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*, while imposing a “gag order” on their own striking members. Just last week, USW Local 7-1 officials blared bullhorns on the picket lines in an effort to drown out discussion between WSWS reporters and striking workers about a strategy to oppose the oil companies and the Obama administration.

All around the Whiting refinery—from South Chicago to Hammond, Gary and Indiana Harbor—lies the evidence of

decades of betrayal by the USW and devastation wrought by the unions’ pro-capitalist and virulently nationalist program and its subordination of the working class to the Democrats. The area is littered with closed steel mills and factories, where tens of thousands of workers lost their jobs and pensions in the name of the USW’s strategy of keeping the corporations “competitive.”

There is not a single reference to this record in Sustar’s article. Nor is there a mention of the Obama administration or the political tasks that confront oil workers and the entire working class. This is common to all of the coverage, what little there is, on the liberal and “left” web sites, including *In These Times*, *Socialist Alternative*, *Socialist Appeal*, the Workers World Party and the Communist Party USA.

This only underscores the fact that these organizations have nothing to do with socialism. They are not fighting for the political education and mobilization of the working class. On the contrary, they are seeking to shore up the discredited trade unions and maintain the political domination of the Democratic Party over workers and youth.

The unleashing of the enormous social power of the working class requires lifting the dead weight of the pro-company unions and their pseudo-left apologists from the backs of workers. New organizations of struggle, democratically controlled and answerable to the rank-and-file, must be built to unify the working class as part of the development of a mass revolutionary movement based on an internationalist and socialist program.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact