

Striking Houston-area oil workers denounce USW betrayal

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Picket lines are continuing at two Houston-area refineries, despite the sell-out agreement reached nationally between the United Steelworkers and Shell, the lead bargainer for the oil companies.

The nationwide agreement, which sanctions excessive overtime, the continued contracting out of jobs and high out-of-pocket health care costs, is the framework for agreements now being forced through at the local level throughout the country. However, at several worksites throughout the country, including two Houston-area refineries owned by LyondellBasell and Marathon respectively, the companies have taken the USW betrayal as a green light to push for even more draconian demands at the local level.

The fact that the United Steelworkers have left workers in the refinery capital of the United States to fend for themselves speaks volumes about their real function as a corporatist organization determined to prevent a showdown between the oil workers, the Obama administration and American capitalism.

The oil companies are making enormous profits through imposing harrowing and exploitative conditions on workers. Marathon Petroleum, for example, made over \$3 billion in profits in 2012 off of \$84 billion in total revenue. LyondellBasell, for its part, made nearly \$4 billion in 2013. The collapse in oil prices has led to even higher profits in the refinery operations of the energy conglomerates.

The abandonment of the workers at Marathon's Galveston Bay refinery is particularly insidious. From the beginning, the main issue in the strike, according to the USW, was work safety. The union has focused on this issue to the deliberate exclusion of all else, attempting to convince the rank-and-file that any demand for a rise in their living standards would turn public opinion against them—even from companies

making tens of billions of dollars.

In fact, the USW has left workers to fend for themselves at the site of one of the worst industrial accidents in recent American history. In 2005, the Galveston Bay refinery, then owned by BP, was the scene of a massive explosion at the plant that killed 15 workers and injured 170. There have been other accidents since then. In February 2013 a large fire broke out, spewing a thick plume of black smoke. In January 2015, merely three weeks before the national strike began, Houston media reported a release of a “powdery material” from the facility, later described by the company as a mixture of silica sand and aluminum oxide, which “clung to cars and lawns” in nearby Texas City, Bayou Vista, La Marque, “and other nearby areas.”

A reporting team from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to striking workers on the picket line at LyondellBasell's Houston refinery. There was a high spirit of militancy among the workers, as well as a palpable sense of outrage among many over the treachery of the USW leadership. The call by the WSWWS for a general strike throughout the industry to defend the oil workers was warmly received. However, all workers that reporters spoke to asked to remain anonymous out of concern about retaliation.

Workers said the main demand of LyondellBasell is the elimination of the current overtime pay structure. Such a change, they noted, would give the company incentive to work their workers for even longer hours, rather than hiring new people, contributing to an even more unsafe work environment as fatigued and understaffed workers man the facility. Workers on the picket line also told reporters they believed that LyondellBasell was holding out as a retaliatory action for the failed unionization attempt by the USW at its

nearby refinery in Channelview, Texas.

“They are asking to take away things. They took what Shell agreed on and want us to have less,” one worker said. “They want to cut overtime pay. They don’t see fit to pay us what’s been in our contract since 1949.”

He explained that the company had been cutting staff levels for years, leaving small crews that were fatigued and over-worked. “There used to be 60 pipefitters here even just a few years ago,” he said. “Now? There are eight. Those guys are on call almost all the time. If they get paged at two or three in the morning, they have to come in or they lose their job. It’s obviously greed.”

Recognizing the broader significance of the strike, he continued, “If we give up, it opens the door to have wages cut. It’s been going on since 1980. I hate it.”

Another worker explained that he saw the refinery workers’ struggle as an important component of the future battles of the working class. “I don’t see the strike as just for me. We set the standard for workers throughout the country. It’s for all of us,” he said.

He was upset with the vague language contained within the USW-Shell agreement concerning safety and expressed doubt it would lead to any real change. Using LyondellBasell as an example, he noted that previous contracts had addressed fatigue and understaffing as well, but had done relatively nothing. “They agreed to guidelines three years ago that they never followed,” he said.

“It’s all stall tactics,” he continued. “These documents are purposefully misleading in language. It makes it look like they’re giving you something when they’re really taking something away. This is my third contract and each time they take something.”

He was angry over USW efforts to sabotage the strike. “[The USW] are the big boys now. They represent hundreds of thousands of workers. Why did they only take out 13 facilities? Why didn’t they take out all of them? Why didn’t they take out the entire union on strike?” He went on to criticize the contract extensions the USW has agreed to at various refineries. “As you stagger [contract extensions], your plan to take out all facilities goes away! It baffles me,” he said.

One worker, upon seeing the *World Socialist Web Site* statement “For a general strike to defend jobs, safety and living standards!” exclaimed, “Thank God somebody is!”

“I was really disappointed with the tentative

agreement,” he continued. “There was no teeth to it. There is nothing to address safety issues. They keep saying they’re going to ‘talk about it.’ But they’ve been talking about it for years! Every three years we’d get ready and brace ourselves financially if a strike were to happen. And when it finally did, we all expected to see a lot more from it than this.”

The worker noted that the company had largely wound down its use of police and private investigators to harass the picket lines. “The first couple weeks were brutal out here with company law enforcement. But now they’ve left because we rolled over and didn’t put up any resistance.”

He explained to the WSWS the dangerous and inhuman working conditions workers faced in the plant. “You see that cross over there by Gate One?” he asked. “Four guys got killed by a crane there. Lots of other people were injured. The crane was overloaded and it fell over backwards and crushed them. I don’t buy the incident investigation report. They say it was ‘operator error.’ They always blame it on the dead guy.”

He said the company would only pay attention to safety regulations in the immediate wake of a disaster. “Then we just slide right back down the hill until another person gets killed,” he said. He noted that understaffing was a major problem. “We routinely have maintenance guys kept out here 18, 19 hours. If there’s a problem they will hold guys until it’s fixed.”

“I believe in the rights of the working class,” he told the WSWS. “That’s why I’m walking out here. But we’re not getting anything done this way! I really felt like [the USW] rolled over on this one. I come from a long line of blue-collar workers. When I look at those wildcat strikes from back in the day, I think, ‘Wow, those guys were in it for the long haul.’ We need to be, too!”



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