

BP workers in Indiana denounce USW isolation of oil workers strike

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After concluding a pattern agreement with Shell earlier this month, the United Steelworkers has moved to quickly impose its pro-company deal on workers throughout the country.

The USW announced on Wednesday that new agreements were ratified at the Tesoro Corporation's plants in Anacortes, Washington and in Carson and Martinez, California. Workers are also returning to work at Shell's joint-venture plants in Texas and Louisiana.

Plants that are still on strike include those owned by LyondellBassell, Marathon and BP, with the isolation of the workers by the USW encouraging the companies to take a hard line in demanding even further concessions. The national agreement on which the local contracts are modeled accepts the demands of the companies on wages and benefits and contains no commitments to seriously address safety, mandatory overtime or the use of contract workers.

At BP's plant in Whiting, Indiana, USW Local 7-1 President Dave Danko has been posturing as a defender of "collective bargaining rights" in the face of BP's intransigence, comparing the actions of the company to Governor Scott Walker's tactics in Wisconsin.

In reality, the union is fearful of anger among workers who justifiably feel that they have been on strike without gaining anything. By "collective bargaining rights," figures such as Danko do not mean the defense of workers' interests, but the ability to collect dues and maintain the position of the union as a labor contractor for the company.

Doug Sparkman, BP's chief operating officer, said in response to the negotiations that BP wants to "allow management the flexibility to make necessary changes during the life of the agreement while recognizing the traditional bargaining rights afforded to the union."

World Socialist Web Site spoke to a number of workers at BP's Whiting, Indiana refinery this week. Many were critical of the union's selective-strike strategy and the isolation imposed on them.

One worker told WSWs reporters, "I don't know anything about the negotiations. We've been told it's about 'collective bargaining,' but I don't know any of the details."

"There were a lot of people that thought we should have had a national strike. We would have had more leverage and more strength. But instead they said they didn't want to 'fire all their bullets.' I thought to myself, 'Why not? Why should we fight alone?'"

"When the first refineries went on strike, many of us were wondering why we weren't on strike. And then when we went on strike, other refineries were still not on strike. We should have gone all out. There's a lot of people that still feel that way. And I don't understand that myself why we didn't."

From the beginning, the USW limited the strike to a small portion of oil workers, while ensuring that the walkout did not significantly impact the production of the companies. The union also wanted to prevent the struggle from coming into conflict with the Obama administration and the Democratic Party.

Asked about the Democrats, the worker said, "They wouldn't support us. We don't live in a democracy. We live in a plutocracy. BP and the oil companies control these politicians."

"When the economic crisis happened, auto workers were told to make sacrifices. Everything was in the red, and everyone was told to make sacrifices. But the CEOs never made any sacrifices at the top. They got paid millions in bonuses. That's the same with BP and the oil companies."

He added sarcastically, "Their jobs are so hard they

get to fly on private planes!”

Another worker noted that his brother worked at nearby US Steel, also represented by the USW, where more than 90 workers on probation were let go.

“My brother was recently let go at US Steel. They were on probation and had finished their training period. You think you have a job and they suddenly fire you! It’s cruel.”

When asked by reporters why the USW had done nothing to defend these workers’ jobs, he just shook his head and shrugged.

The USW has worked with the steel companies to facilitate the destruction of thousands of jobs in the entire northwest Indiana industrial corridor and the surrounding region. The United States Steel Corp. announced this week that it would temporarily idle its plant in Granite City, Illinois, laying off 2,000 workers.

The USW is also negotiating contracts at plants that were never on strike. ExxonMobil is seeking to reach an agreement at its Beaumont, Texas refinery with a separate duration (up to seven years) from the four-year pattern agreement reached with Shell.

A veteran worker at Beaumont told the WSWS, “A revolution is coming to America. I don’t know when but it is only a matter of time before the working class wakes up and says enough is enough.

“The local union here presented the four-year contract plus a ‘me-too’ agreement for the next national contract, giving us a contract for at least seven years. The company hasn’t responded.”

He said that the company had pulled the replacement workers that had been deployed in the run-up to negotiations. “They sent engineers and retired supervisors, who we called ‘shadows,’ to follow us around and learn our jobs from us in case of a strike. They also were making sure we wouldn’t sabotage something as if we would do that when it concerned our own safety. They do that every contract.

“I don’t blame the LyondellBasell workers [who were on strike at a nearby refinery] for being angry. I’m kind of ashamed we were not in the fight. None of us wanted to go on strike, but surely nobody wants to be on their own because they are not going to win.

“The only way the USW could have won was to pull us all out. But they didn’t want that. When you look at the union it mirrors the company people who are always sucking up to the bosses. It is a career for these

local union people. They love to kiss Leo Gerard’s behind.”

One of the principal measures that the USW has hailed as a “victory” is the establishment of joint union-company committees to supposedly address safety and staffing issues.

“In the early 90s, the union started forming teams with management,” the Beaumont worker said. “One was the Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s (OSHA) Star program, which was known as a voluntary protection program. This left the union and company committees to police themselves and make things safe. But it’s all a dog and pony show. According to OSHA, they didn’t have enough inspectors and that’s why they put these programs into effect.

“We resisted that in Beaumont for a few years and finally they got enough guys on the committee. They got a couple of guys killed a couple of years ago, and the refinery lost its OSHA Star status.”



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