

Indiana “solidarity” rally promotes Democrats, covers up USW betrayal of oil workers’ strike

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The United Steelworkers (USW) and the Northwest Indiana AFL-CIO organized a rally in downtown Whiting, Indiana on March 27. The event was billed as a “solidarity rally” for the 1,100 workers on strike at the local BP refinery for nearly two months, with the organizers urging union members from throughout the area to send a message of unity to “BP, all Lakefront Industry and the entire region.”

The event did nothing to strengthen the fight of these embattled workers. After decades of betrayal of struggles by the USW and the AFL-CIO, the unions were incapable of attracting more than a few hundred workers.

This was not a real measure of support in the area. Just two miles from Chicago’s Southside, the area is home to tens of thousands of teachers, auto, steel and other workers who confront the same struggles and same enemies. The fact is the USW and AFL-CIO had no intention of organizing a significant turnout. Both have actively sabotaged and isolated the oil workers’ strike in order to prevent it from becoming a catalyst for a far broader movement of the working class against the corporations and the Obama administration, which the unions support.

Dan Murchek, president of the Northwest Indiana Federation of Labor, and Dave Danko, president of USW Local 7-1 at the BP refinery, presided over the rally. In their remarks, they did everything to conceal the treachery of the USW and AFL-CIO and the political issues confronting the working class.

Since the strike began in early February, oil workers across the country have fought to improve their living standards and oppose unsafe levels of overtime and the contracting out of jobs. The USW, however, limited the

strike to a small fraction of the 30,000 USW workers in the industry and allowed the oil giants to continue production and amass profits. Although the union executives sit on a \$350 million strike fund, the USW handed out no cash benefits and told strikers to sign up for welfare or beg the union for help on utilities and other bills.

Then in mid-March, the USW negotiated a sellout agreement with lead industry bargainer Shell that abandoned workers’ demands for safety, job security and improved living standards. The USW pushed through contracts at several locals, while leaving workers at BP’s operations in Whiting and Toledo, Ohio, along with facilities owned by Marathon and LyondellBasell in Texas and Kentucky, to battle the oil giants alone.

Facing criticism over its disastrous selective strike policy, USW bargaining committee member Jim Savage told a meeting of Whiting workers at the beginning of March that the union had not called out all its members because it did not want “government intervention” in the labor dispute.

Union officials at the March 27 rally made no attempt to square their warnings about a possible intervention by the Obama administration with claims that the Democrats were “friends of labor” engaged in a life-and-death struggle with right-wing Republicans.

Local 7-1 President Danko told workers to ask their state legislators how they have advanced the interests of Indiana workers. “If their answer is that they stripped you of your rights and your pensions, then they should be stripped of their office,” Danko said. “We want to have a say in our working conditions, health and safety and collective bargaining. We won’t give up our

rights,” Danko told the crowd.

Workers are, of course, concerned with defending their rights against the demands of the oil companies. But Danko’s focus on a “voice in the workplace” has nothing to do with defending such rights, let alone encouraging the collective resistance of the working class. The USW only wants to be a partner in the ongoing attack on wages and conditions, in order to assure a minimum number of union workers who will pay dues to the organization. It also wants an expansion of various labor-management schemes, which, while providing lucrative career paths for USW officials, have done nothing to protect the safety of workers.

In practice, the USW and AFL-CIO long ago abandoned any serious right to collective bargaining. Instead they have collaborated for decades in the destruction of jobs, living standards and work conditions in the name of defending the profits and “competitiveness” of corporate America.

During the rally the union officials handed the podium over to several Democratic Party politicians—East Chicago Mayor Anthony Copeland, US Representative Pete Visclosky, State Senator Karen Tallian and State Representative Linda Lawson—who postured as defenders of workers’ rights.

Condemning Governor Mike Pence for making Indiana a so-called Right-to-Work state, Congressman Visclosky told the audience, “Never give up the rights for collective bargaining.” Mayor Copeland urged BP officials to “return to the table” and “accept responsibility” for workers and their families.

The USW officials and Democrats also promoted economic nationalism, blaming the recent layoffs at steel companies producing pipes and rigs on the supposed “dumping” of cheaper steel by South Korea and China. The AFL-CIO and the Democratic Party has long peddled such anti-foreigner poison to divide the working class in the face of the concerted attack by global corporations—such as BP—and to tie workers to their “own” capitalists in a fratricidal race to the bottom.

The political differences between the Democrats and Republican concerning the unions are entirely tactical and hinge on how best to attack the working class. While Republicans use reactionary right-to-work laws to undermine and even destroy the unions—and undermine the Democrats financially—the Democrats

have long used the services of the unions to suppress the resistance of the working class to the demands of the ruling class.

The Democrats, no less than the Republicans, are class enemies of workers. Nowhere is the anti-working class character of the alliance of the Democrats and trade unions demonstrated more clearly than in the Chicago-Northwest Indiana region.

A few miles away at Ford’s Chicago Assembly Plant, more than two-thirds of the workforce is earning half wages as result of the UAW’s collaboration in Obama’s restructuring of the auto industry. Obama’s former chief of staff, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, shut down 50 public schools after the teachers union betrayed the 2012 strike. The Democratic machine that dominates the Illinois state legislature is spearheading an attack on public sector pensions, while cities like Gary, Hammond and Whiting—long run by the Democrats—lay largely in ruins after decades of deindustrialization and cuts in critical social services.

There is immense popular opposition to these conditions. The oil strike itself is a harbinger of the return of explosive struggles by the working class in the United States, as well as around the world, against inequality, austerity, dictatorship and war. For these struggles to be unified and guided by a political strategy that genuinely represents the interests of the working class, workers must break from the unions and Democratic Party and reject their program of class collaboration, nationalism and support for capitalism.

New and independent organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by the rank and file, must be built to break the isolation of the oil workers and unify the working class in a common struggle to defend social and democratic rights. This must be part of the development of a mass revolutionary movement based on an internationalist and socialist program, which includes putting the global energy industry under the democratic control of working people.



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