

USW continues betrayal of remaining oil refinery strikers

Tom Hall
6 April 2015

The United Steelworkers union's isolation of striking oil workers continues as the employers at the few refineries that remain on strike seize upon last month's national sellout agreement to push for even more draconian cuts, secure in the knowledge the USW will not lift a finger to defend these embattled workers.

Some 3,000 workers are still on strike at BP, Marathon and LyondellBasell facilities in Indiana, Texas and Ohio. Last Friday, the union pushed through a sellout local agreement at Marathon's refinery in Catlettsburg, Kentucky where workers are expected to return next week.

The new contract was passed by a vote of 226-153 according to lead union negotiator David Martin, indicating a large opposition, even after two months in which the USW has sought to starve workers into submission. The deal includes meager raises contained in the USW national agreement that hardly keep up with the rate of inflation: The new contract also contains "language that will limit routine maintenance contracting," according to Martin, the same vague language that will do nothing to stop the replacement of fulltime workers with lower-paid contractors with no job security or health and pension benefits. The union also agreed to implement an alternate work schedule, with 12-hour workdays.

A spokesman for Marathon hailed the agreement. The union attempted to claim victory, with Martin declaring, "We got what we wanted on the national side and part of what we wanted on the local issues." Just two weeks ago, however, during a week of negotiating under a federal mediator, Martin publicly declared the union's willingness to settle merely for an extension of the previous contract, which Marathon rejected.

Workers at the Catlettsburg refinery, one of the first refineries called out on strike on February 1, have

endured eight weeks of a strike in which the USW has refused to provide benefits from its \$350 million strike fund, instead distributing grocery store gift cards and forcing workers to apply for what help is available, cap in hand, to local union committees and welfare agencies. Unable to survive such conditions many workers at the remaining refineries have crossed picket lines and returned to work, while others see no purpose in continuing the strike under the treacherous leadership of the USW. It is under these circumstances that the USW was able to ram through the local contract in Catlettsburg, despite a significant "no" vote.

While abandoning the interests of oil workers, the USW apparatus is concerned only with protecting its own financial and institutional interests. Workers have reported that one of the demands the USW is seeking at the BP-Husky refinery near Toledo, Ohio involves getting some contractors who currently belong to building trades unions under the jurisdiction of the USW so it can collect their dues money.

A reporting team from the *World Socialist Web Site* visited the picket line at the BP-Husky refinery late last week. There were only three pickets when the reporters arrived. A younger worker immediately approached reporters, having recently read the *World Socialist Web Site's* article on the USW "solidarity" rally in Whiting, Indiana (see: Indiana "solidarity" rally promotes Democrats, covers up USW betrayal of oil workers' strike).

The worker, who asked to remain anonymous, told reporters he believed that the oil workers' struggle could have a broader impact. "What happens here will help determine what happens with other workers," he said. "We are the talk of Jeep," he continued, referring to the Chrysler Jeep plant in Toledo where auto workers face a September contract deadline.

At the same time, he expressed frustration at the fact that so many of his fellow workers, including some of his friends, were crossing the picket line, and the low level of support, including financial support, from the union. He said workers had to bring their utility bills to the union hall, where a union committee would decide who and what would get paid. Strikers also received a meager \$100 in Kroger grocery store gift cards.

He said it wasn't entirely clear to him why the strike was continuing. The union is going to do whatever it wanted, in his opinion. Speaking about the USW's attempt to get contractors at the refinery to pay dues, he said, "That doesn't seem right. They would be paying twice."

Another worker with eight years seniority complained bitterly about the treatment workers received from the police. "The laws are all on the company's side. The law isn't for the workingman. I remember when I was young, people were out there on strike fighting for their rights. Now you get eight people on a picket line and they call the police."

"The world isn't what it was," he continued. "The strike isn't a weapon any more and it doesn't seem we can stop them."

At the two Houston-area plants still on strike, the LyondellBasell refinery in Pasadena and the Marathon refinery in Texas City, the companies have gone on the offensive, seeking nothing less than a total capitulation. LyondellBasell representatives walked out of federally mediated negotiations last month, reportedly so abruptly that union negotiators "thought they were just taking a break."

Union representatives have responded with handwringing, arguing that their services in maximizing the company's profits are not being sufficiently appreciated. "We have played a key role in the record setting profits seen this last year," an update sent to members of USW Local 227 read. "We are running this refinery better today than ever. And what do we get for it? What do we want for this? Nothing. We are not greedy. A roll over from the last contract is all we expect. To try and punish the very group that puts their lives on the line every day to help LyondellBasell reach these milestones is not only unconscionable, but an insult and a slap in the face."

Marathon has been arguably more provocative at Texas City. In full view of picketers, management tore

down crosses erected at the refinery two weeks ago during a candlelight vigil to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the explosion at the refinery that killed 15 people and injured more than 150 more. The USW responded with a tepid request that the crosses be returned so the local could erect a memorial at the union hall.

The bitter experience of the refinery workers of the past two months underscores the complete bankruptcy of the trade unions and the need for workers to break with these corporatist organizations and build new organizations of struggle, independent of the unions and the Democratic Party.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)