

As Friday contract deadline approaches, USW keeps 30,000 oil workers in the dark

Jessica Goldstein
31 January 2019

Contracts for 30,000 oil refinery and chemical workers in the US will expire at 12:01 a.m. Friday. The United Steelworkers union started negotiations with the oil corporations, leading with Royal Dutch Shell, on January 16. Since negotiations began the USW has worked deliberately to keep workers in the dark on the status of contract talks while it works out a deal with management that will ensure a continued flow of enormous profits into the coffers of the oil companies.

As the deadline draws near, the union has sent out a series of text messages to workers, ostensibly to update them on the progress of the talks. One such message sent to workers yesterday vaguely reads, “Company passed an unacceptable proposal at the National Oil Bargaining table earlier today. USW has rejected it. Negotiations continue.” No further details were provided.

According to a January 25 report by Reuters, the union and Shell were engaged in “heated” talks over the USW’s proposal to replace contract workers with union workers. It would be a mistake to think that union officials are interested in raising the living standards of contract workers, who are usually paid less than other employees and receive few to no benefits. Their only concern is to expand the union’s dues-paying base.

Another January 25 article in the *Northwest Indiana Times* stated that the USW was “seeking a ‘no retrogression’ clause that would renew past agreements on certain issues, such as no layoffs, job security, health and safety, rate retention and plant closure procedures” and “successorship that would preserve union contracts if any refineries were sold or otherwise traded hands.”

It said nothing about other concerns of workers such as unfair firings or forced retirement schemes nor plans

to oppose attacks on workers resulting from refinery and plant selloffs so long as the USW is allowed to continue to collect union dues.

During this round of negotiations workers would do well to remember what came of all of the USW’s posturing as a champion of workers’ health and safety in the 2015 contract negotiations. After the union isolated 7,000 workers on strike at 12 oil refineries and three chemical plants in the US, it pushed through a sellout contract that included no concrete plans for action but only promised “discussions” on health and safety issues with the corporations.

The USW pushed the workers’ struggle for wages aside early on in the 2015 strikes and proclaimed that the struggle was only about safety. It thus laid the groundwork for a sellout contract that provided no real improvements to working conditions in the refineries and plants and a pitiful 14 percent wage increase over four years—a pay cut when inflation and decades of attacks on workers’ living standards are taken into account.

Thanks to the USW enforced 2015 agreement, the Big Five have amassed even greater profits. In the first three quarters of 2018 alone they have recorded over \$198 billion in gross profits and are set to significantly outpace their 2017 numbers.

The USW is proposing an eight percent annual wage increase over the life of the agreement—mere pocket change for the oil giants. The USW has said nothing about the corporations’ diversion of profits sweated off the backs of workers to finance stock buybacks and other forms of Wall Street gambling.

The gargantuan profits of the oil companies come at the expense of the lives and health of oil workers, who often toil in dangerous conditions. Workers engaged with flammable substances, like oil and gas, must take

extreme precautions to protect themselves from harm. Because of the companies' deliberate short-staffing of the plants it is not uncommon for oil workers to spend 70 or more hours per week on the job with very little time to spend with their families and friends. Overwork from short-staffing and production demands further compound the dangers they confront in the workplace. The USW has been silent on these issues since the 2019 bargaining talks have begun.

What can workers expect to happen on Friday? There is a possibility that the union could reach a sellout agreement with the corporation in the final moments, or extend the current contract as it seeks to work out a concession deal. Another possibility is that the USW could call a strike vote to allow workers to let off steam, only to ignore it as it did with 31,000 steelworkers in September. Then there is the possibility that the union could call a strike after a vote, but only mobilize a fraction of the workforce as it did in 2015 in order to divide and demoralize opposition to a sellout.

Under these conditions how can workers wage a real fight for their demands? During the 2015 contract struggles, the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* were the only political tendency that showed oil workers a way forward in their struggle, calling for workers to take the fight for higher wages, full healthcare benefits and safety into their own hands by forming their own rank-and-file committees independent of the USW. We called on oil workers to link together their struggle with other sections of workers in the US such as autoworkers, teachers and Amazon workers and reach out to workers in other industries around the world.

While the 2015 strike showed the determination of oil workers to fight, their struggle was isolated and suppressed by the USW. Workers must not allow that to be repeated.

Oil workers confront multi-national corporations that reap their profits by exploiting the labor of workers all over the world. Workers must reject the nationalism of the USW and two big business political parties that is used to divide them from their working class allies in the Middle East, Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Oil workers have strong allies among the thousands of US teachers who organized wildcat strikes in the past year, among the "yellow vest" protestors in

France, and 70,000 maquiladora workers on the US-Mexico border in Matamoros. All of these workers came into struggle in opposition to the efforts of the trade unions to suppress their mobilization.

To be successful the broadest industrial mobilization of the working class must be tied to a socialist program and perspective aimed at taking control of the energy giants and transforming them into publicly-owned national enterprises to be used for social need, not private profit.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact