

Marathon workers in Galveston Bay, Texas reject USW-company sellout contract

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Marathon Petroleum Corporation workers in Galveston Bay, Texas rejected a contract proposal by the United Steelworkers union in a vote on February 11. The “no” vote in Galveston Bay follows workers’ rejection of the contract offer at ExxonMobil’s refinery in Billings, Montana on February 6.

An exact vote tally has not been released, but it is reported that the rejection was “overwhelming”. A “proposed change in leadership on the production units to salaried staff from hourly chief operators” was a primary reason for the rejection, according to David Jankowski, vice president of United Steelworkers (USW) local 13-1. Workers reportedly also objected to changes in time off and sick leave that would benefit management.

Companies use schemes like the change from hourly to salaried work in order to cut labor costs by eliminating overtime pay.

After the “no” vote, Marathon spokesman Sid Barth told the press: “Negotiations continue, operations continue.” Jankowski told Reuters on February 11 that “no date has been set for the talks” and that the union is “waiting on the company for dates and times.”

Despite the overwhelming contract rejection vote the USW has not set a strike deadline and instead is apparently prepared to drag out contract negotiations indefinitely. The union has kept workers in the dark about the details of the contract negotiations since they began in mid-January, deliberately keeping secret even the “highlights” of the negotiations until a deal was cut between the union and Shell Oil Company, which led the national contract talks with the USW.

No one should take as good coin the explanation advanced by the USW for the latest contract rejection votes. The tentative contract with Shell was reached

after only two weeks of discussions in order to quickly put a cap on mounting anger among the rank and file.

The concessions contract includes a national wage increase of only 11 per cent over three years, far less than the original eight percent annual wage increase that the USW had told workers earlier. No concrete proposals to address health and safety problems have yet been released.

Text messages from the USW to the membership stopped after January 31 when the Shell deal was reached. Outside of reporting by the *World Socialist Web Site*, the situation surrounding the contracts has received little attention in the press in comparison to the last set of contracts negotiated by the USW with US Steel and ArcelorMittal. Both resulted in a miserable betrayal of the 31,000 workers in November, who voted unanimously to strike in September only to have their will ignored, with the USW forcing through a pitiful 14 percent raise over four years after a three year wage freeze.

Based on its entire record, it is clear that the USW has no intention of calling a strike among the 30,000 oil workers in the United States whose contracts are expiring. This is because the USW, like unions around the world that are integrated into the capitalist system, shares similar class interests to those of the corporations, interests that are diametrically opposed to those of workers.

Workers at the Galveston Bay refinery struck for nearly five months after rejecting management’s 2015 contract offer. Their struggle was part of a partial, nationwide strike of oil and petrochemical workers in the US who were determined to fight the corporations for higher wages and safer working conditions. The USW, at the behest of the corporations and the Obama administration, limited the strike to only a small portion

of the workforce to restrict its impact in order to safeguard the interests of US and world capitalism.

During the 2015 strike, the USW did nothing to try to halt the use of strikebreakers who were brought in to keep production going and profits rolling into the oil company coffers. As the strike wore on, the union attempted to starve workers on strike pay at the same time claiming that the strike was not about wages, but solely about safety. In reality, the workers' struggle was about both safety and wages.

At the end of the struggle, workers felt little choice but to accept the terms of the USW's sellout contract including a pitiful 14 percent pay increase over four years and no real resolution of safety and health issues, only the promise of "discussions" with the corporate bosses.

The outcome of the 2015 contract struggle underscores the importance of the call made by the WSWS and Socialist Equality Party for workers to take the struggle into their own hands by constructing independent factory and workplace committees.

These committees should demand that trusted elected workers representatives oversee the contract negotiations, to be held in public, and that workers be provided ample time, at least two weeks, to study the full contract proposal before voting.

Workers should follow the example of tens of thousands of maquiladora workers on the US border in Matamoros, Mexico who organized a rebellion independent of their pro-company union in order to win demands for a 20 percent pay increase and a cash bonus.

Rank-and-file committees should prepare for nationwide strike action and coordinate their struggle with workers at other refineries in the US and around the world.

Workers should be guided by the knowledge that they, not the corporate owners, are the decisive social force in society and that, guided by a correct perspective and leadership, nothing can stop the working class.

The logic of the class struggle is moving toward a general strike. The experience of the workers in Matamoros, "yellow vest" protests in France, and the struggle of teachers in US, which have erupted again nearly one year after rank-and-file teachers in West Virginia and other states organized independent wildcat

strikes using social media, are among the most prominent examples.

Critical industries such as oil and gas must be freed from the control of the corporate billionaires with the transformation of the global energy companies into publicly held, nationalized enterprises under the democratic control of the working class. This will ensure that these resources be used to meet the needs of the world's population, not the profit interests of a handful of wealthy individuals.

*We ask any oil and energy workers interested in learning more about the rank-and-file committees and socialism to contact us today at **wsws.org/oilworkers**.*



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact