

St. Paul oil refinery workers' strike enters sixth day

Anthony Bertolt
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Almost 200 refinery workers at Marathon's St. Paul Park refinery in Minnesota launched a strike last Thursday over safety conditions and stagnant wages and benefits.

In particular, workers are vehemently opposed to the company push to replace highly skilled full-time positions with contractors, dramatically raising the danger of fatal accidents and environmental disaster.

Negotiations began in November, but no agreements were reached prior to the contract expiration on January 1. This is the first strike at this plant since 2006. In 2006, workers at this plant went on a seven-week strike over issues related to "on-call" status, time off and safety concerns.

Marathon is one of the world's top oil companies, with a market capitalization of roughly \$21 billion in 2020. It is the ninth largest oil company in the world by revenue and market cap, and the sixth largest in the US. The company's St. Paul refinery, which typically produces over 100,000 barrels of oil a day, is experiencing reduced output due to the pandemic conditions.

Oil giants are continually seeking to cut costs, creating dangerous working conditions. This has led directly to incidents such as the Husky Energy Oil refinery explosion in Superior, Wisconsin in 2018, a town on the border of Minnesota near Lake Superior. The explosion injured 11 workers and sent toxic fumes into the atmosphere, prompting evacuation orders in a three-mile radius. In 2011 and 2013, a Marathon refinery in Detroit also had fires directly caused by budget cuts.

Similar cuts were already underway at the St. Paul Park Marathon refinery before contract negotiations began. In early 2020, the refinery switched full-time firefighting staff to be "on-call" for their shifts,

prompting legitimate safety concerns from firefighters for the plant and St. Paul as well as refinery workers. The Marathon refinery in St. Paul Park is located close to the Mississippi river, meaning that any explosion or incident carries an immense risk of widespread environmental pollution.

Marathon has taken a hard-line stance on the strike, seeking to intimidate workers and break any opposition. According to reports from Teamsters Local 120 officials, a Marathon company official tried to speed through the picket line, nearly hitting the striking workers. The intransigence of the company is also expressed by their decision to keep the refinery running with a scab workforce, despite the utter recklessness of the move from the standpoint of safety.

While workers have taken the courageous step to strike against Marathon, the Teamsters union is keeping the strike isolated and working to prepare a concessions agreement, in line with its record over the last four decades of defending the profit interests of corporate America and pushing through sellout contracts. This is highlighted by the fact that Teamsters Local 120 has kept the strike isolated to only 200 workers out of the 12,000 members from workplaces in Minnesota, Iowa, South Dakota and North Dakota.

The Teamsters should not be trusted to lead the Marathon workers. The union sold out a strike this past weekend of 1,400 produce workers at Hunts Point market in New York City, without even the modest demand of a \$1 annual wage increase having been achieved. While the strike won support throughout the state and nationally among calls to expand the strike, the union produced a contract and pushed it through in a snap vote, not allowing workers time to study the details.

A key element in the Teamsters' betrayal was its close

collaboration with the Democratic, which sent “left” figures such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to the picket lines to proclaim support for the Hunts Point strike while working behind the scenes to shut it down. Democratic mayor Bill de Blasio also sent riot police after striking workers early on the strike.

However, in the St. Paul strike the Teamsters are openly courting right-wing forces. On its Facebook page, Local 120 applauded a visit to the picket line by Republican congressman Pete Stauber on Tuesday, proclaiming, “Democrats and Republicans can't seem to agree on much these days ... EXCEPT for the fact that MARATHON PETROLEUM EMPLOYEES are doing the right thing by STANDING up for SAFETY at the St. Paul Park Refinery.”

Stauber is one of the many Republican lawmakers who provided political cover to Trump's attempt to overthrow the result of the presidential election. He joined an amicus brief in support of the Texas Attorney General's lawsuit falsely alleging that the outcome was tainted by election fraud. As with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Stauber only “withdrew” his support at the eleventh hour, after the conspiracy to overturn the election received a blow from Democratic victories in both Senate runoffs in Georgia.

The United Steel Workers (USW), which represents more oil refinery workers than the Teamsters, has been no different. The USW called only a partial national strike of oil workers in 2015, keeping many of its members on the job. For five months, thousands of oil refinery workers went on strike across the nation and the USW isolated the movement by calling a fraction of them out and settling contracts for its members one workplace at a time.

It ended the strike even as management at Marathon's refinery in Galveston, Texas refused to accept the national agreement, leaving workers at the refinery to fend for themselves. While safety was the central issue of the strike, the Galveston plant which the USW abandoned was the site of a catastrophic explosion in 2005 which killed 15 and injured 170.

In the 2019 contract negotiations, the USW refused to call a strike despite widespread concerns among its member over safety issues.

The struggle of Marathon workers can, and must be won, but it requires a new strategy. Marathon workers must take the conduct of their struggle out of the hands

of the Teamsters and form a new organization and expand their struggle.

A rank-and-file strike committee should be formed by workers, independent of the Teamsters, with an immediate appeal issued to oil refinery workers throughout the US and other workers (including Amazon and UPS) in Minneapolis-St. Paul to broaden the strike. Such a call would win wide support from workers, masses of whom are facing potentially deadly exposure to COVID-19 at their workplaces and a relentless assault on their wages and working conditions.

We urge workers at Marathon to contact us to begin discussing the organization of a rank-and-file safety committee.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact