

ExxonMobil prepares to lock out hundreds of workers at Beaumont, Texas refinery

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28 April 2021

Oil workers are heading into a major class battle as ExxonMobil prepares to lock out 650 workers at its Beaumont, Texas, refinery on Saturday unless they capitulate to its demands for further givebacks. The US-based multinational is already hiring potential strikebreakers to man its refining and packaging plant, which is located 85 miles east of Houston.

In the face of this, the United Steelworkers (USW) has left the refinery workers isolated and has also signaled its willingness to abandon workers' elemental demands for improved staffing levels and safety standards. The stage was set for ExxonMobil's attack by the USW's betrayal of the 2015 strike by more than 6,550 Shell, BP and other oil workers at 15 facilities. Throughout that months-long struggle, the USW kept tens of thousands of other oil workers on the job, including Beaumont workers, despite their willingness to join in a common struggle.

It is clear the USW plans to acquiesce to ExxonMobil's demands. On Wednesday evening, the USW agreed to an "orderly transfer" of the refinery to temporary workers if ExxonMobil locks out union-affiliated workers on Saturday. Union representative Richard "Hoot" Landry said union officials met with the company as early as Monday to discuss the possibility of a transfer.

"We are communicating and preparing communications to the company because the union is ready and able to do whatever is necessary to meet with them and work toward a new agreement," Landry told the *Enterprise*.

USW Local 13-243 has 650 members at the oil refinery and adjacent lubricants blending and packaging plant. The complex has a production capacity of 369,024 barrels per day and is in the middle of an expansion project that could make it the largest refining facility in North America. The company and union have been negotiating since January on a contract to replace the agreement the USW forced through in 2015, when the refinery's expansion began.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to David, a retired oil worker with more than 35 years of experience, about the situation at the refinery. David worked at the plant when the

USW sold out the 2015 strike, a move David said led directly to the situation at the plant today.

"Everything that's happening—if I had to point a finger at someone, it's all because of the union."

After isolating the striking workers in 2015, the USW pushed through sellout contracts that did not address any of the workers' health and safety concerns. The union said the strike was not over wages but only safety. The deal the union reached, however, only promised "discussions" over worker fatigue, understaffing and other health and safety issues. Meanwhile, workers received a 14 percent raise over four years, which amounted to a de facto pay freeze due to inflation.

"When [USW] International brought us the contract, we asked them what's next if we don't like it. They told us that we were on our own if we went out on strike," David said. "After that, I said the company was going to take away everything in the next contract."

Oil and gas companies profited immensely thanks to the USW's betrayal. In 2020, ExxonMobil's operating revenue amounted to approximately \$178.6 billion. The oil and gas giant has consistently been ranked among the largest companies in the world based on revenue, with some of its main competitors including supermajors such as Royal Dutch Shell and BP.

While demanding more concessions from workers, ExxonMobil CEO D.W. Woods got a 25 percent raise in 2019, raking in \$23.5 million in total compensation. The company has added billions in debt to pay expensive dividends to its wealthy investors even as it announced plans in late 2020 to slash the jobs of 14,000 workers—15 percent of its global workforce—including 1,900 workers at its Houston-based headquarters.

Neither the USW nor ExxonMobil has released public details about current proposals for a contract, but the union once again has hypocritically taken up the banner of "safety."

"These negotiations are not about wages," said Darrell Kyle, president of USW Local 13-243. "Our greatest

concern is making sure our lives and our jobs are safe and secure. Safety in our workplaces also protects our families and community.”

David, who has worked through at least ten contracts, explained that safety and health are major concerns among oil refinery workers. They are subjected to grueling work schedules and forced overtime, leading to extreme fatigue and the high level of workplace accidents. Workers are forced to toil in long-neglected and decaying refineries, filled with corroding pipes and other hazards.

The USW, however, is complicit in the deaths of dozens of oil workers. Amid the union’s 2015 sabotage efforts, a worker collapsed and died on the job at a plant across the street from the USW-organized Motiva refinery in New Orleans. Since 2010, at least 30 workers have been killed in accidents at USW-organized refineries.

According to a worker David is in contact with, one of ExxonMobil’s demands includes the shredding of seniority. Eliminating seniority would allow the company to fill any vacancy as they please, which a worker could normally bid for based on experience. David also spoke about the company’s plan to eliminate senior positions.

“One issue is the operations department. There is an ‘A’ Operator and there may be none or several ‘Assistant’ Operators on any particular unit. Exxon wants to eliminate the ‘A’ and eventually have all at the same rate of pay... The USW screwed this up in 2015 by letting [Exxon] get Beaumont separated from national bargaining.”

ExxonMobil has already begun hiring temporary workers, circulating a notice for at least 40 process operators with two years’ experience to work at the Beaumont refinery for three months. The company asked David to come out of retirement to be an operator during a lockout, a request he adamantly rejected.

Workers at Beaumont’s downtown refinery must learn the lessons from the 2015 strike. While workers were determined to fight and even called for a national strike, their struggle was isolated by the USW. At the time, the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* were the only political tendency that showed oil workers the way forward in their struggle, calling for workers to take the fight into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees, independently of the USW, to expand the strike.

The brewing conflict takes place as thousands of other workers across the US are engaged in strikes seeking to recoup decades of lost wages and other concessions given up by the unions. More than 1,300 steelworkers at Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI)—who were also locked out during the 2015 oil workers struggle—have been on strike since March 30. The workers, who are members of the USW, have not had a raise in seven years. Three thousand

manufacturing workers at Volvo Trucks in Virginia and 1,100 Warrior Met Coal miners in Alabama are fighting to restore wage cuts and other concessions agreed to by the United Auto Workers (UAW) and United Mine Workers (UMW) respectively.

On Monday, 2,000 grad student workers walked out at New York University to demand improved wages, health care and child care, even as 3,000 Columbia University students mount opposition to a sellout agreement by the UAW.

The rising militancy of US workers is part of growing resistance of the international working class against the ruling class and capitalist governments throughout the world, which have sacrificed the lives of millions of workers during the pandemic even as they funneled trillions into the stock markets and the bank accounts of the billionaires.

To develop a global counteroffensive by the working class, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties around the world have called for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). A new path for the working class must be created to coordinate its struggles in different factories, industries and countries in opposition to the giant corporations and the corporatist unions.

The development of a coordinated fightback by workers around the world must be combined with a new political strategy. To put an end to the economic dictatorship of the corporate and financial oligarchy, the working class must take political power and convert giant corporations like ExxonMobil into public utilities, collectively owned and democratically controlled by workers, as part of a planned, world socialist economy based on human needs, not private profit.

To learn more about the formation of new organizations of working-class struggle and the fight for an international socialist strategy, we urge ExxonMobil and other workers to join the ICFI’s International May Day Online rally this Saturday.



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