

Locked out ExxonMobil workers fight for jobs and safety at Texas refinery

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More than 650 oil workers remain locked out of ExxonMobil's Beaumont, Texas refinery and packaging plant. The company escorted the workers out of the plant on the morning of May 1, the day after ExxonMobil rejected a comprehensive contract proposal from the United Steelworkers union, which included an offer by the USW to freeze its members' wages. Negotiations have not resumed since then.

The workers' last contract, signed in 2015, with the oil and gas giant expired in January this year. During the 2015 strike of some 6,500 Shell, BP, Tesoro and other oil workers, the USW International leadership forced ExxonMobil workers to remain on the job, angering Beaumont workers. The USW International then signed a deal with ExxonMobil separating Beaumont workers from the industry-wide pattern agreement and imposing a different contract expiration date on Beaumont workers. The move effectively isolated oil workers in Beaumont from collectively struggling with other US oil workers.

When speaking with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters this weekend, Beaumont workers repeatedly linked the outcome of the 2015 strike to the situation they face today. "We were taken off of collective bargaining in 2015. Because of that, Exxon can get away with what they're doing now," said Jake, a worker employed at the plant for more than 20 years.

In a public statement, ExxonMobil said it sought to bring Beaumont's refinery and packaging plant contract in line with standards it implemented at its other plants to remain "competitive" in the future. Jake explained the company was targeting the seasoned "A" operator position, a job classification that workers consider imperative to maintain for their safety. An "A" operator is a type of floor manager tasked with monitoring safety in any given unit.

"You have to be trained in every position before you can become an 'A' operator," Jake said. "I don't know anyone in the position that doesn't have at least 15 years of experience and training. If something goes wrong on the floor, they're the first people capable of responding."

Workers stated ExxonMobil wanted to eliminate the position as a way of cutting wages, eliminating seniority, and arbitrarily firing whomever they want. Despite its claim that it has "bargained in good faith," ExxonMobil hired strikebreakers along with security guards to intimidate picketing workers and record their actions.

ExxonMobil is one of the largest publicly traded energy and chemical producers in the world. It reported a revenue of \$59.15 billion and a net income of \$2.73 billion for the first quarter of 2021. In the last year, the company's market shares appreciated by 37 percent. In response to falling oil prices in 2020, the company announced it was considering cutting up to 14,000 jobs globally.

Rozena Dendy was appointed as manager of ExxonMobil's Beaumont plant in December 2020 and now leads to company's efforts against the locked-out workers. According to Dendy's LinkedIn account, she has worked with ExxonMobil for more than 22 years. Dendy served as Department Head for Operations Support from 2008-2011 at the Torrance Refinery in Torrance, California. Dendy oversaw multiple operations managers who were responsible for ensuring safety.

In 2009, Torrance Refinery worker Nelson Tan died after receiving second and third-degree burns over 85 percent of his body after he was struck by a blast of steam and boiling water. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) issued a pitiful \$32,700

fine to ExxonMobil.

Most workers only had one paycheck coming after the lockout was initiated. With the needs of their families to consider, workers have been forced to file for unemployment benefits for income. According to the USW, it will not provide any assistance from its multi-million-dollar Strike and Defense Fund until the fourth week of a strike or lockout. After that, it will pay the local union \$260 per week per member, and local will determine how the money is distributed.

After hourly workers were walked off of their jobs, which the company said would prevent threats to safety, ExxonMobil hired contractors and brought in managers from other plants to continue producing gasoline and diesel. Matt, another experienced worker who spoke with the WWSWS, explained that inexperienced contractors can be a major health and safety concern.

To stress the reality of his workplace, Matt showed WWSWS reporters images of a young man who used to work in the plant prior to an accident. The man was young and newly married and entered the industry to take care of his family. After a fire broke out at the plant, the worker was horribly disfigured and scarred.

Workers at the Beaumont refinery consider safety as a matter of pride as well. The plant sees so few accidents that ExxonMobil recognized workers with a “President’s Award” last year. However, workers feel that the company has shown nothing but disregard by locking them out.

“We worked through a pandemic because we’re essential workers. When the plant froze during the winter storm, we stayed locked inside and got this place running before most others could. We give and we give, but Exxon just wants to take away,” Matt said.

ExxonMobil claimed the workers’ health and safety demands would “significantly increase costs” for the company and has repeatedly refused to accept any proposal without major givebacks since January. USW Local 13-243 officials proposed a contract with no wage increases but ExxonMobil wants even more.”

Predictably, the USW has kept 30,000 oil workers on the job although ExxonMobil’s lockout is fully supported by the rest of the oil and chemical giants, which will seek similar concessions in negotiations with the USW next year. Marathon, the largest US refiner, will be the lead company in a new industry-

wide contract after the current one expires on February 1, 2022.

Workers at the Beaumont refinery are engaged in a struggle against both the company and the USW, which has spent decades colluding with corporate executives and Wall Street asset strippers in the restructuring of the steel and energy industries. Although USW membership has fallen from 1.3 million in the late 1970s to around 850,000 today (and this number has been inflated due to mergers with other unions), the assets of the USW International have increased to \$1.5 billion, according to its latest filing with the US Labor Department.

Last year, the USW had half a billion dollars in disbursements, including \$116 million for the “purchase of investments and fixed assets,” and \$3.5 million in official salaries for its top 21 executives. The reported salary of USW President Thomas Conway was \$217,292 last year, not including other income streams from investments and positions on corporate and advisory boards.

It is imperative that ExxonMobil workers take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by forming a rank-and-file strike and negotiating committee. This committee should break the USW’s isolation of the strike and unite with striking ATI steelworkers, Alabama coal miners, Massachusetts nurses, Volvo Truck workers, New York City grad student workers and other sections of workers fighting the sacrifice of workers’ lives and livelihoods to corporate profit.

To unify the struggles of American workers with workers around the world, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has called for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to build and coordinate the growing international struggles of the working class. To find out more about joining the growing national and international network of rank-and-file committees, contact us at wsws.org/workers.



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