

Lockout at ExxonMobil Beaumont, Texas refinery continues as USW negotiators reject management's contract offer

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The United Steelworkers (USW) Local 13-243 bargaining committee at the ExxonMobil Beaumont, Texas refinery and lubricant packaging plant rejected a proposed contract offer from management last week as more than 650 oil workers ended the second week of a lockout.

Following the start of bargaining in January, ExxonMobil gave written notice on April 23 of its intention to lock out workers starting May 1 unless they accepted a proposal that included major regressive changes impacting workers' safety, security and seniority rights.

Management submitted its proposal at a bargaining session Wednesday, May 12, the first meeting between the USW and the company since the start of the lockout. ExxonMobil offered a six-year contract running until January 31, 2027. The company said its deal included provisions that would provide refinery-specific wage increases, a reclassification of certain employees, elimination of language that prioritizes seniority in transfers and the revision of layoff and hiring language.

ExxonMobil released an employee information bulletin Friday stating that it is offering an immediate 1.5 percent wage increase and a commitment to match any National Oil Bargaining Pattern wage increases for the remaining years of the contract. However, workers in the company's blending and packaging plant would receive no raises for the first three years of the contract and incremental wages in the final three.

The USW ultimately felt it had no choice but to reject the deal since it was unlikely to be ratified by the membership, in particular because it included the elimination of "senior bidding language" for job

openings, which prioritizes employees who wish to transfer to vacancies within the plant based on seniority. The offer was particularly provocative given that seniority rights have been a major point of contention since the start of negotiations.

The company said its proposed deal would bring the plant up to "standardized best practices" it has in place at refineries in Baytown and Baton Rouge, "where employees are afforded opportunity based on qualifications and business needs as opposed to bidding based on seniority exclusively."

When speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Beaumont workers stressed that they do not want to see any cuts to health and safety measures, and they are particularly concerned about seniority rights because of safety. Oil and gas workers constantly face the risk of fire and explosion due to the ignition of flammable vapors and gases. Well gases, harmful vapors, and hydrogen sulfide can be released from wells, transport vehicles, and other industrial equipment.

Workers maintained that seasoned individuals with many years of experience should get access to any openings first to maintain a proper level of safety. Workers say ExxonMobil is targeting seniority as a wage-cutting measure and a way of arbitrarily firing any employee they want.

ExxonMobil has also proposed reclassifying certain operator posts to "process operators," which it says would provide "additional flexibility when making training assignments to better ensure more people are qualified in their operating area." Among other stipulations included in this change, the company claims it has "no plans" for the reduction of positions in the process department. Along with this,

management is pushing for an end to the “A” operator position, a job Beaumont workers say is necessary for safety. Workers in these positions normally have at least 15 years of experience and extensive training.

Beaumont workers said they have made numerous sacrifices for ExxonMobil and have put themselves and their families at risk to keep one of the most profitable companies running during the COVID-19 pandemic and inclement weather. However, this has only encouraged the company to mistreat them.

Other changes proposed by management included expanded paid parental time-off benefits from three days to one week, extended probationary periods for all new hires and extending the lockout or strike notice period from 75 days to 120 days.

Meanwhile, ExxonMobil announced estimated first quarter 2021 earnings of \$2.7 billion, up from a loss of \$600 million in the first quarter of 2020. ExxonMobil laid off thousands of workers after last year’s fall in oil prices. However, over the last year, the company’s market shares have appreciated by 37 percent.



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