

Lockout at Beaumont ExxonMobil plant in Texas enters second month

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More than a month after members of the United Steelworkers union (USW) were locked out of ExxonMobil's Beaumont plant, workers are still fighting to preserve jobs and defend safety conditions as the union isolates their fight. The company's Beaumont facility is its third largest in the US and produces 2.8 billion gallons of gasoline a year in addition to being a major producer of Mobil 1 motor oil.

Approximately 650 USW Local 13-243 members have been locked out of the ExxonMobil Beaumont, Texas refinery and lubricant packaging plant since May 1, after negotiations between the union and company fell apart. The workers' last contract with the oil and gas giant, signed in 2015, expired in January this year. The union has called the lockout an unfair labor practice and has filed charges with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB).

This follows a well-worn pattern. Rather than broaden the struggle and mobilize the full strength of the working class, the unions promote illusions in the anti-labor NLRB, tying workers down in a lengthy legal process that almost invariably ends in defeat.

The USW has also requested that a federal mediator be brought in to help resolve the lockout. However, ExxonMobil has refused to agree to the mediation process.

Union and company officials met for the first time since the lockout began on May 12, where a six-year deal was proposed, but ultimately rejected by the union. ExxonMobil said the contract would provide refinery-specific wage increases but would eliminate "senior bidding" for jobs, which give preference to workers wishing to transfer within the plant based on how long they've been employed.

Although ExxonMobil claims the deal emphasizes

qualifications over seniority, workers have adamantly stated their fight to protect seniority is a safety concern. Oil and gas workers experience some of the highest workplace fatality/injury rates in the US. Beaumont workers speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site* argued that seasoned individuals with many years of experience should get access to any openings first, to maintain a proper level of safety.

Workers doubled down on their health and safety demands after a May 5 incident when residents near the plant along the Neches River noticed plumes of black smoke coming from a flaring tower. Around the same time, reports on social media of two ambulances stopping at the facility started to circulate and a fire was eventually reported at the facility.

ExxonMobil reported to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality that there had been a process upset with an olefins unit at its chemical plant, which released a couple of hundred pounds of carbon monoxide and various chemicals, but was ended in about 47 minutes.

Less than three weeks later, a Facebook post claimed that the U.S. Coast Guard and other emergency personnel were responding to the cleanup of chemicals in the river. According to the company and the Texas General Land Office, a hydraulic pump on a fire suppression device had failed and about 1 gallon of fluid had leaked onto the dock and into the water.

After USW-affiliated workers were escorted out of their workplaces, ExxonMobil hired temporary contractors and brought in supervisors from other plants to keep the plant running. Workers raised concerns over this move, but the company claims that there have been no more incidents than normal since the transition. However, workers refuted this claim, citing the fact that their plant was commended last year

for its excellent safety record. Regular employees not affiliated with the USW remain on site.

As the lockout drags on, reports have emerged of efforts to decertify the USW local at the refinery. ExxonMobil claimed several locked-out workers have asked about the process of removing their union representation. The company issued a bulletin explaining the technical parts of calling an election to decertify and how certain positions would be affected in the event it was passed.

“The Company continues to receive decertification-related questions from employees and has published some of those questions along with answers,” spokesperson Nakisha Burns said in an email.

According to the NLRB, at least 30 percent of the union workers in the facility’s bargaining unit would have to sign a petition to begin the process. USW staff representative Richard “Hoot” Landry told the Beaumont Enterprise that the conversation about decertification was not new and had been happening well before the lockout began.

“There was an employee in the plant that was trying to collect signatures for decertification efforts and was sharing information with workers, but it eventually grew to a point where it was creating a hostile work environment that was brought up to management,” he said.

Landry said he could not comment on the details of what happened, and the union was not accusing ExxonMobil of pushing the movement to decertify, indicating a growing dissatisfaction among the rank-and-file union membership.

In a document filed on May 23, USW lawyers alleged that the company had been providing an unnamed employee with materials about decertification, as well as use of the company email system and allowed them to keep a lockbox on the property for petitions since early March. The complaint also alleged the company had been making changes outside of the 2015 contract that impacted safety and rights of workers, like ending the requirement for employees working at heights to have a spotter.

The company told reporters it could not respond to the direct charges in the complaint, but that it has been acting appropriately and within the law throughout the contract negotiation.

Meanwhile, many USW workers joined

demonstrations on May 25 outside ExxonMobil headquarters in Irving, Texas that coincided with the energy giant’s annual shareholders meeting. The company is facing a serious shakeup in its board of directors, following sharp criticism for its poor climate policy.

The company acknowledged that two of its board seats went to self-proclaimed “climate activist” hedge fund Engine No. 1 last week. Now, a quarter of the 12 seats on the board are occupied by directors advocating for a change to ExxonMobil’s climate strategy. The hedge fund argued that the climate crisis poses an existential threat to ExxonMobil; one it has not taken seriously. Unlike other energy giants, like BP and Royal Dutch Shell, Exxon has doubled down on oil and gas despite growing concern about climate change.

Shareholders said the company’s strategy has not paid off. ExxonMobil was the world’s most valuable company as recently as 2013 but has lost nearly \$200 billion in market capitalization since its peak. The corporation had been a consistent member of the Dow Jones Industrial Average since 1928 until it was kicked out of the index last summer.

The lockout is connected to management’s effort to increase profitability at the expense of workers. ExxonMobil previously 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.

Workers must draw the lessons of the 2015 national oil workers strike, where the USW called out only a fraction of its membership, pulling its punches and effectively isolating workers at different refineries. The result was a series of miserable contracts that failed to meet workers’ minimum demands.



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