

ExxonMobil worker speaks about Beaumont, Texas refinery lockdown

Trévon Austin
15 July 2021

The lockdown of approximately 650 refinery workers in Beaumont, Texas affiliated with the United Steelworkers union (USW) entered its eleventh week last weekend.

The company escorted workers out of the plant, with the compliance of and help from union officials, the day after it rejected a contract proposal from the USW, which included an offer to freeze workers' wages. Workers had been working without a contract since January. The USW declined to call for an official strike and has called the company's actions an "unfair labor practice."

At the same time, the USW is preparing betrayals for thousands of its worker-members across North America. The union has rammed through a sellout deal involving 1,300 striking workers at Allegheny Technologies (ATI) in Pennsylvania and four other states. For three months, the USW isolated ATI workers and is attempting to starve them into submission with a paltry \$150–\$225 per week in strike pay.

Also, nearly 2,500 workers at the Vale mining and processing complex in Sudbury, Ontario have rejected two concession-filled contracts brought back to them by the USW. The Local 6500 bargaining committee unanimously recommended the first contract to the workers.

It was only after workers overwhelmingly rejected the first contract that the USW felt compelled to recommend voting against the second, although they contained virtually the same terms. The USW is paying Vale strikers \$370 per week, an amount that is less than the workers would earn under unemployment benefits.

The WSWs spoke to a Beaumont refinery worker, John, who reported that the union had not told him anything about the struggles of other USW-affiliated

workers. When asked what he would tell other workers, he responded, "I would fly out to support them if I could because it's what we need to do. We should be using all of our power and resources to fight. There are 600 of us here. I wish we would all come together and march in the street."

"That's how they get us—when they make us think we're alone," John said.

As ExxonMobil workers in Beaumont struggle against the oil giant, the USW has kept 30,000 other oil workers across North America on the job. Next year, USW-affiliated workers employed at Marathon, the largest US refiner, will face a similar situation as their working brothers and sisters at ExxonMobil, after their current contract expires on February 1.

The USW is engaged in a campaign to isolate and betray its workers employed at the Beaumont facility. According to the union leadership, the bargaining committee has proposed at least five contracts to ExxonMobil, which rejected each one. However, workers have not been allowed to vote on, or see, any of these deals or their provisions.

The weekly meetings between the union and corporate management have taken on a ceremonial character, as both parties repeatedly state how "far apart" they are after convening. Meanwhile, locked-out workers are relying on unemployment payments to survive, and some are forced to look for other work to make ends meet.

This is not the first time the USW has betrayed workers in the Beaumont facility. In 2015, some 6,500 Shell, BP, Tesoro and other oil workers went on strike against the oil and gas giants. The USW International leadership forced ExxonMobil workers to remain on the job and then signed a separate deal with ExxonMobil, which separated workers in Beaumont

from the industry-wide pattern of “collective bargaining.” The move effectively kept oil workers in Beaumont from struggling together with other US oil workers.

“We were taken off of collective bargaining in 2015. Because of that, Exxon can get away with what they’re doing now,” one refinery worker told the WSWWS this past May.

John, who was also employed at the Beaumont plant during the 2015 strike, agreed with the refinery workers statement and called the strike’s outcome “disheartening.”

“It wasn’t the outcome I wanted, and I was disappointed,” he said. “We were ready to fight, and we should have held out longer.”

The USW limited the 2015 strike to a small fraction of the workers it represents in the industry, even though the union had the manpower to shut down two-thirds of the refinery capacity in the US at the time.

“We had the power and people were willing to fight. Unfortunately, the strike was cut short. I just hope we can continue to hold out this year,” said John.

ExxonMobil has released numerous public statements, claiming it continues to “bargain in good faith,” despite hiring strikebreakers along with security guards to intimidate picketing workers and record their actions. The company seeks concessions from workers to bring its Beaumont refinery and packaging plant in line with standards the company claimed it implemented at its other plants in order to remain “competitive” in the future.

Workers stated ExxonMobil’s plan includes cutting wages, eliminating seniority, and arbitrarily firing whoever they want. Workers are particularly concerned about the company’s bid to eliminate the “A” operator position, a job that workers have repeatedly argued is important to safety in the workplace.

In response, 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. The USW has done little to oppose the gangsterism of the company heads.

With an almost \$60 billion revenue and a net income of \$2.73 billion for the first quarter of 2021, ExxonMobil is one of the largest energy and chemical producers in the world. Over the course of 2020, the

company’s market shares soared by 37 percent. Undoubtedly, its shareholders have also benefited from the recent rise in oil prices, which rose to nearly \$80 a barrel over recent months. This, apparently, was not enough for the company, who is now trying to increase profitability at the expense of workers.

John expressed a great deal of frustration at the fact that a multi-billion-dollar company refused to consider the needs of their workers.

“It’s just not right. They made people come to work through storms, and floods, and freezes. We’re the ones who make their products. All we’re asking is for them to give a damn and keep us safe.”

ExxonMobil workers in Beaumont must break the USW’s isolation of the strike and unite with striking workers in other industries. Workers must draw the lessons of past experiences, including the USW’s 2015 betrayal. Not the slightest bit of confidence can be placed in the union, which has proven itself an impediment to the success of the workers’ struggle.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact