

Locked out ExxonMobil workers reject contract ultimatum

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Nearly six months after being locked out by ExxonMobil, oil refinery workers in Beaumont, Texas rejected a contract ultimatum by the giant energy corporation in a vote on Tuesday evening. The workers courageously rejected the threats by company executives, who said the lockout would only end if workers accepted their last offer.

This is all the more impressive since the approximately 600 workers have been left to fight one of the world's largest and most profitable corporations on their own, since the United Steelworkers union has vehemently opposed expanding the struggle to 30,000 other USW oil workers along the Gulf Coast and the rest of the US.

Aware of the deep hostility to the contract, which gives ExxonMobil greater control over how jobs are assigned ahead of a major expansion and freezes some workers' pay, officials from USW Local 13-243 called for a "no" vote. They nonetheless brought back the deal for a vote, no doubt to take a measure of how much resistance there was to another pro-company deal. While the USW reported that 400 workers of the original 650 who were locked out voted on the deal, union officials would not release the breakdown of the vote, saying only that the union's position was supported "overwhelmingly."

The Beaumont workers, who had been working without a contract since January 2021, were locked out of the refinery and packaging plant by ExxonMobil on May 1. While the company has sought to keep some of its operations going with managers and temporary staff, many of the locked out workers have gotten other jobs. According to the union, 583 of the workers are still dues-paying members.

ExxonMobil is adamant about imposing a contract which allows it to "remain competitive." The company

made \$2.7 billion in just the first three months of 2021 and is in the process of expanding its Beaumont facility into the largest in North America. The ongoing contract dispute is critical for the company, which will undoubtedly use the lockout as a precedent for pressuring other workers to accept its demands.

The company claimed that the most recent contract contained changes the USW bargaining committee put forward in earlier negotiations, including language that added seniority protection for employees, a demand that workers requested over safety concerns that come with working with volatile chemicals. According to the company, the offer also includes increased job security and improved paths to promotion. However, corporate management has stated it will begin withdrawing these "beneficial offers" if workers do not accept the deal by November 1. This also includes the loss of a \$500 signing bonus and 2021 wage hikes.

Local union leaders said the offer, the first from the company since the lockout began, and the first that the USW has brought to its membership for a vote, only met a fraction of the union's demands. Along with increased job security and safety in the workplace, workers have demanded seniority be prioritized so that experienced workers can oversee safety precautions. ExxonMobil insists on basing job placements on "qualification," a practice in place at other plants, which opens the door to the use of outside contractors and violation of workplace health and safety rules.

Locked out workers have been kept on starvation rations even though the USW sits on a strike fund worth hundreds of millions of dollars. The union reportedly reduced its meager \$260 a week strike benefit in July, ended health care supplements in September, and unemployment benefits are set to expire.

“We haven’t been getting our paychecks. So, everybody’s families are experiencing a hard time right now. And we’re just doing our best to maintain,” union member David Prejean told local reporters at 12News. Prejean said his family was struggling and bills were piling up, but he voted no because ExxonMobil’s proposal was not good enough.

At the same time, a small number of discouraged workers have filed a petition with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and collected some signatures to decertify the USW.

This is not the first time the USW has betrayed workers at the Beaumont facility. In 2015, some 6,500 Shell, British Petroleum (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 an individual 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 uniting together with other US oil workers.

The continued isolation of the locked-out Beaumont workers is part and parcel of the treachery and pro-company character of the USW. While selling out the ExxonMobil workers, the USW is also collaborating with the United Auto Workers union to prevent a strike by 3,500 auto parts workers at Dana Inc., who rejected a USW-UAW-backed contract by 90 percent last month.

The resilience of the ExxonMobil workers parallels workers involved in drawn out battles in other industries who have stood fast against both the corporations and the pro-company unions. This includes the 700 nurses at St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts, who after seven months of strike have rejected the “last, best and final offer” from health care giant Tenet. More than 1,000 coal miners at Warrior Met in central Alabama are continuing their six-month fight despite the treachery of the United Mine Workers union, which has isolated them and forced the workers to rely on poverty-level strike benefits.

The potential now exists to break the isolation of the struggles. Over the last several weeks, a powerful strike wave has developed, involving 10,100 workers at agricultural and construction machinery maker John Deere & Co. throughout the Midwest; thousands of

nurses in western New York, California and Oregon; 1,400 Kellogg’s workers in Michigan and other states, and hundreds of distillery workers in Bardstown, Kentucky. This is part of a global upsurge of working-class struggle, including struggles by oil workers in Iran, Mexico and other countries who are demanding substantial wage increases and less exhausting schedules as the energy monopolies benefit from rising prices.

Beaumont workers must draw the conclusion from their nearly six-month struggle. If they are to win their demands, they must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the pro-company agents in the United Steelworkers. This means forming a rank-and-file committee to formulate their own demands and establish direct lines of communication with workers throughout the industry in the US and internationally, and workers in ongoing struggles. Only a coordinated counteroffensive by the working class can reverse decades of union-backed concessions, which have robbed workers of trillions of dollars.



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