As oil giants announce massive profits, BP oil refinery worker in Indiana declares: “We’re ready to strike”

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Are you an oil worker? Contact the WSWS and let us know what you think about the extension of the contract and the company’s “final offer.”

Over 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers across the United States are gearing up for a battle against the big oil corporations, which are demanding workers accept a de facto pay cut and the further destruction of jobs even though the companies are recording massive profits.

Workers are determined to win substantial improvements in wages and working conditions, but the United Steelworkers (USW) is seeking to block a strike. If it is forced to call one, it will attempt to isolate and betray the struggle, as the USW did in the last strike in 2015. Shortly before the expiration of the previous three-year contract at 12:01 a.m. on February 1, the USW announced it was extending the old National Oil Bargaining (NOB) agreement on a day-by-day basis.

Marathon Petroleum, which is leading the negotiations for Chevron, Shell, ConocoPhillips and 10 other companies, issued a provocative “last, best and final” offer to the USW before the contract expiration. The proposal included insulting pay raises that average 2 to 3 percent a year even though the current inflation rate is 7 percent.

In a perfunctory text message on Wednesday, the USW informed workers, “Late Monday night, after consulting with NOBP locals in their regions, the Policy Committee unanimously rejected Marathon’s last offer. All expired NOBP sites are now on rolling 24-hour extensions. The Policy Committee and NOBP Lead Bargainers are meeting tomorrow to discuss the union’s next steps.”

The USW’s discussions on its “next steps” totally exclude any consultation with rank-and-file workers who have the most at stake. On the contrary, the USW is keeping workers completely in the dark.

“We are not getting any information,” Chris, a worker at the BP refinery in Whiting, Indiana, and a veteran of the 2015 strike, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “We’re e-mailing the local, and all they are saying is ‘negotiations are ongoing.’ We’re getting the same thing out of the USW International. I’ve been through negotiations in 2012, 2015, 2019, and this is worst. We are getting more information from the company than we are from the union. We got workers active on Twitter, and guys from the other locals are saying the same thing.

“The USW says they are meeting now to discuss what the next option is because Marathon said this was their ‘last, best and final’ offer. But they’re not discussing it with us. We have no idea what the USW has put forward in negotiations—that’s what’s most frustrating. The union says it want ‘significant wage increases’ but nothing is specific.

“The companies’ offer is ridiculous,” he added. “Since 2012, the average wage increase has been about 3 percent and up to 4.5 percent in some years in the 2019 contract. Now they are offering 2–3 percent when inflation is 7 percent, and they’re making giant profits.”

On Wednesday, Marathon, the US’s largest refiner, announced it had made $9.74 billion in profits in 2021, based on fourth-quarter earnings that were twice as high as analyst expectations. Marathon reported it had completed more than half of its $10 billion share-buyback program and will repurchase another $5 billion in stock this year, in a move designed to drive up share values for its richest investors.

Marathon’s profit announcement follows similar reports from ExxonMobil ($23 billion in 2021 profits and $10 billion for stock buybacks in 2022) and Chevron ($15.6 billion in 2021 profits). In a conference call with Wall Street investors, Marathon CEO Michael Hennigan boasted about rising fuel prices and company profits, declaring, “Based on the trends over the last few months, we’ve become less concerned about the pace of recovery in transportation fuels demand. Product inventories remain tight and US demand continues to recover.”

The BP worker said that oil refinery workers were ready to fight. “Hopefully, the USW will call us out but none of us know. It seems inevitable that we will strike with Marathon saying this is their ‘last, best and final” offer. If that is the case, none of us are afraid of hitting the picket lines. We’ve seen workers fight at Kellogg’s and John Deere, and our families are ready.

“I stood on the picket lines in 2015. But the companies don’t care if only a few refineries are out like it was in the last strike.

We need to pull out all the refineries to have an impact, not these one-sies and two-sies like they did in 2015. The USW has a giant strike fund, worth hundreds of millions of dollars, and we need it to fight the corporation."

But the worker warned about the sabotage of any struggle by the USW. "The USW leadership is basically in bed with the company," he said, pointing to the 10-month lockout of ExxonMobil workers in Beaumont, Texas, which is the result of the USW's decision to remove the workers from the national agreement during the 2015 strike.

About the Beaumont struggle, he added, "Everybody knew when they were taken off the national contract that this was going to happen. That is a major sticking point here in Whiting because BP wants to pull us off the national pattern agreement and force us to give them a 120-day notice before any strike. That way everyone else would settle the national contract and they could pull a Beaumont on us.

"The unions in America have done this to themselves. During the 2015 strike, all the craft locals sent their members across our picket lines. After the strike, BP kicked out the craft workers and hired guys from down south for $15 an hour, for a job that a union guy was getting $45 an hour."

The BP worker explained why workers were determined to fight. "The majority of workers are most upset because we have been deemed essential workers through the pandemic. Of course, you need oil, but we did our part for these companies, and now they are making record profits and not even trying to hide it. Instead, they are throwing it in our faces.

"Early in the pandemic it was really bad. The company didn't care. They sent the salary guys home and only gave us two weeks off to help with childcare. After that we were on our own, even if the kids were home from school. The company could have worked with us and adjusted out shifts so we could split childcare with our wives. But they had zero interest in helping us out.

"The supervisors and executives have been working from home for two years. They've even forced us to come to work during the blizzard in the Chicagoland area. Very little work is being done in the refinery because we're not going to help them catch up before a strike. But they insisted we come in despite the snowstorm. 'If you don't come in or if you are late the normal attendance policy will apply,' they wrote us in a message. All the while the supervisors are working from home.

"Although the revenue and profits of the oil companies have fully recovered from pandemic-driven economic crash in 2020, the companies are determined to keep labor costs as low as possible. They are pushing out production to meet rising demands after laying off 60,000 oil industry workers and shutting five refineries.

"Operators are forced to do a lot of mandatory overtime. Now BP is pushing the 'DuPont Schedule.'"

The introduction of this brutal scheme will only mean more sleep deprivation, fatigue and accidents. According to the web site *Business Management Systems*, "The DuPont 12-hour rotating shift pattern uses 4 teams (crews) and 2 twelve-hour shifts to provide 24/7 coverage. It consists of a 4-week cycle where each team works 4 consecutive night shifts, followed by 3 days off duty, works 3 consecutive day shifts, followed by 1 day off duty, works 3 consecutive night shifts, followed by 3 days off duty, work 4 consecutive day shift, then have 7 consecutive days off duty. Personnel works an average 42 hours per week."

The BP worker explained that conditions in the refineries were already highly dangerous. "They preach safety, but it is meaningless. They expect you to do your job, no matter what. Every spring and fall a 'turnaround' cycle is scheduled, when the units are down for inspection, cleaning, maintenance and repairs. During this time, there is no production. But safety just goes out the window because the managers are paid bonuses based on metrics of how far ahead of schedule they are and under budget.

"They get around this by holding 'asset team' meetings where decisions are reached by consensus, and nobody is held responsible if something goes wrong. We say things need to get fixed, but they cut corners and ignore us. Our refinery is an old facility, and it always leaks," he said, pointing to the dangers of working-class communities just outside the refinery fences.

To break through the conspiracy of silence and oppose the USW–management conspiracy to ram through another pro-company agreement, oil refinery workers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. This means building rank-and-file committees, which are democratically controlled by workers themselves and will advance demands that workers need.

This includes a 40 percent wage increase and full Cost-of-Living protections; a ban on outsourcing, refinery closures and job cuts and the rehiring of all laid-off workers; the enforcement of the eight-hour day and the abolition of forced overtime; and workers' control of production and health and safety, including protections against COVID-19 and 10 days of fully paid quarantining for all infected or exposed workers.

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