

US oil refinery workers face two-front war against energy companies and USW

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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."

Thirty thousand oil refinery workers in the United States are being kept on the job by the United Steelworkers (USW) union after the expiration of their three-year labor agreement on February 1. Although workers voted overwhelmingly last summer to sanction a walkout, the USW bureaucracy has unilaterally agreed to "rolling" 24-hour contract extensions with the oil corporations, allowing them to actively recruit replacements to keep operations going in the event of a strike.

Marathon Petroleum, which is leading negotiations for 12 oil companies, has issued a provocative "final settlement" to the USW, which includes a de facto pay cut for workers and does nothing to stop the ongoing attack on jobs and the exhausting schedules for refinery workers. Knowing such a deal would be rejected out of hand by the rank and file, the USW announced it had rejected the offer shortly before last week's deadline.

Since then, the USW has kept workers completely in the dark. Union officials have not told workers how long they plan to keep them on the job, what specific demands the union is raising, and what the union plans to do about the intransigence of Marathon and the other companies.

In a perfunctory text message issued last Thursday, the USW said, "Policy Committee back in their regions meeting w/each unit to answer questions on rejected proposal, discuss issues, explain strategies & plan actions." These meetings, however, did not involve any of the workers whose livelihoods are at stake. Instead, International Union officials met with local union executives who have, in turn, told local workers nothing.

One BP refinery worker in Indiana told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "There have been zero updates or comments from the union local or national. Nobody is happy because nobody knows what is going on. We don't know if they are close on negotiations or even if they are negotiating."

A blunt warning must be made: If this struggle is left in the hands of the pro-company stooges like USW President Tom Conway and National Oil Bargaining Chair Mike Smith, it will be sold out and refinery workers will be saddled with a contract that will severely erode their living standards, destroy their jobs, and lead to more injuries and death. This is proven by the USW's decades-long record of betrayals, from the collaboration with the steel bosses in the destruction of hundreds of thousands of workers' jobs and pensions, to the sabotage of the 2015 oil strike and the deliberate isolation of workers at ExxonMobil's Beaumont, Texas, refinery, who have been locked out for more than 10 months.

Oil refinery workers must take the conduct of this fight into their own hands. In every refinery and petrochemical plant, workers should form rank-and-file committees, controlled democratically by workers themselves, to outline their demands, break through the conspiracy of silence by the USW, and prepare for a nationwide strike.

These demands should include:

- A 40 percent wage increase and full cost-of-living protections—to counter the ravages of inflation and the stagnation of wages due to previous USW-backed contracts
- The restoration of the eight-hour day and abolition of forced overtime
- Workers' control over production speed and health and safety, including to fight the spread of COVID in the refineries
- The end to the lockout of the ExxonMobil workers in Beaumont and the bringing in of all refinery workers into a national contract with a common expiration date
- The USW must provide workers with their full income, paid out of the massive Strike and Defense Fund, to show the corporations that workers are ready for a serious fight.

At the same time, the rank-and-file committees will make a direct appeal for common action to hundreds of thousands of workers at BNSF and other railways, West Coast dockworkers, steel and autoworkers, educators and others who have all been forced to risk their lives during the

pandemic while the billionaires and mega-millionaires never had it so good.

With crude oil hitting \$90 a barrel and prices at the gas pump rising to a seven-year high, the energy monopolies are reaping the highest profits in years. This includes Marathon (\$9.74 billion), ExxonMobil (\$23 billion), BP (\$19.3 billion), Shell (\$19.3 billion), Chevron (\$15.6 billion) and ConocoPhillips (\$8.1 billion). These six companies plan to spend at least \$30 billion on stock repurchase programs in the coming months—enough to pay all 30,000 oil refinery workers \$1 million apiece. While finding unlimited resources to boost share prices for their wealthiest investors, the oil companies are demanding workers accept a 2-3 percent raise a year when inflation is running at an annual rate of 7 percent.

After crude oil prices tanked in the first months of the pandemic, the companies laid off 60,000 workers and shut five refineries in the US. While prices have more than recovered and energy companies are flush with cash, the corporations are determined to keep labor costs as low as possible. They are doing this through a concerted campaign to drive out older, higher-paid workers with pensions, and replace them with low-paid contractors or unionized workers making far lower wages and benefits.

The companies are also cutting corners on health and safety, including sacrificing the necessary maintenance and repair of equipment during turnarounds by paying supervisors bonuses to finish ahead of schedule and under budget. The horrific consequences of this can be seen in the wave of recent explosions and other accidents, including at the Chevron refinery in Pasadena, Texas (2020); the Philadelphia Energy Solutions refinery (2019) in Pennsylvania; Marathon's Carson, California refinery (2020) and ExxonMobil's Baytown, Texas refinery (December 23, 2021).

Oil workers should have no illusions in the “pro-labor” president in the White House. Any struggle by oil workers will immediately come into conflict with Biden, who like Trump is a tool of big business. Biden would no doubt cite “national security” concerns, including threats to the US gasoline supply and disrupting the White House's reckless drive to war against Russia, to threaten striking workers with fines or worse. A federal judge in Dallas, Texas, recently cited the danger to the “national supply chain” to block a strike by 18,000 BNSF railway workers who are fighting the imposition of a punitive absenteeism program.

Biden and the whole political establishment want to suppress the growing movement of workers to improve their wages and conditions because it threatens the relentless rise of the stock market, which has boosted the fortunes of the world's billionaires by \$5 trillion even as more than 900,000

lives in the US have been lost during the pandemic.

Conway, Smith and the other highly paid USW bureaucrats, who are no doubt having behind-the-scenes discussions with White House officials, are pointing to a potential White House intervention as an excuse not to call a strike at all or to limit a walkout like they did in 2015. But this is only because they are preparing to sign another sellout deal.

There is growing support in the working class for a real fight against big business and both corporate-controlled parties. Over the last year, workers at Warrior Met Coal, Volvo Trucks, Dana, John Deere, Nabisco, Frito-Lay, Kellogg's, Huntington Ingalls shipyards and other locations rejected pro-company contracts pushed by the unions, including the USW. This is part of a global upsurge of the working class against the sacrifice of workers' lives and livelihoods for corporate profit during the pandemic. In the last few years alone, oil workers in Iran, Greece, Sri Lanka, the North Sea region and Siberia in Russia have carried out powerful strikes against the global energy companies.

The conditions are ripe for a powerful industrial and political counter-offensive by the working class. Everything depends, however, on the independent initiative of workers themselves. Oil workers should follow the lead of workers across the US and internationally by building rank-and-file committees to break through conspiracy of silence and sabotage by the USW and mobilize the broadest sections of workers and youth to win their demands for secure, good-paying and safe jobs.

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