

Oil refinery workers demand strike action, denounce USW information blackout: “We don’t want to work 80 hours a week”

Our reporters
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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, the USW’s news blackout and the company’s “final offer.”

It has now been over a week since the expiration of the national contract covering 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers in the United States. Workers are livid over the information blackout by the United Steelworkers, which has extended the contract but has not even acknowledged if union officials are in negotiations with Marathon and other oil companies.

The USW issued a two-sentence text message Tuesday afternoon, stating, “Today, BP announced its highest profits in 8 years, made possible by its essential workforce, especially those who couldn’t work from home. This week, solidarity actions happening nationwide w/ NOBP sites demanding this extremely profitable industry rewards our hard work.”

While the USW organizes impotent publicity stunts and beams messages onto the sides of corporate buildings, workers are demanding strike action to shut down the industry and win substantial improvements in wages and working conditions. Marathon, which is leading negotiations for Big Oil, has issued a “final settlement,” with an insulting annual raise of 2-3 percent, while inflation is raging at 7 percent a year.

“As an employee at BP Whiting and veteran of the 2015 strike we are at a loss,” one worker wrote in an email to the *World Socialist Web Site*. “We went on strike in ‘15 because of staffing, fatigue, and bargaining. Well, none of that has changed. We have been through buyouts, constant talk of layoffs, and maintenance moving to operations. We also still staff ‘swoop downs’ and what the company does is raise

overtime percentage to keep you working. Why does that happen? Staffing. Things we went out on strike for.

“We also discussed at informational meetings that we would turn down the 120-day proposal, as we should. We also said we wouldn’t give these greedy f...s an hour past deadline. We’ve had three years to prepare. Here we are on week two of not knowing what is happening. Last information we received was ‘rollouts’ [24-hour contract extensions] will continue until we hear otherwise! What is that? I also am third generation USW employee and spent 10 years in Local 395 Ironworkers. Union my whole life. It’s time to stop and fight because everyone I work with knows ‘if’ we get a contract it’s going to be a joke.”

With crude oil hitting \$90 a barrel and gas prices at 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).

“Given the profits the oil companies have made last year and workers coming to work while seeing multiple Covid cases around the refinery daily, their offers on pay raises don’t quite meet my standards,” another refinery worker wrote caustically in an email to the WSWs.

Another worker from a Houston-area refinery spoke angrily about the betrayal of the 2015 strike and the silence from the USW. He told the WSWs, “I walked the picket line for five months for nothing in 2015. I have no problem going on strike but if only a few refineries go out it is going to kill us, not the companies. All they have to do is ramp up production at the other refineries.”

He added, “We don’t even know if they are negotiating. The USW leadership doesn’t even care about getting a contract. If they maintain the status quo, they are still getting their union dues. We pay them thousands of dollars a year and they don’t want to do anything to deplete their strike fund. It’s like the railroad workers, the unions have had them on a two-year rolling contract extension and the workers are still paying dues.

“The USW has become a money-making machine, a company within a company, which is funded with our dues. You file a grievance over a clear contract violation and the union comes back and says, ‘The company says it’s not a violation’ and that’s that.

“Now they’re pushing ‘decarbonization’ as one of union’s contract demands. But the companies are already making money using scrubbers to pull carbons out of the refineries, and a company in Iceland making millions taking carbon out with geothermal processes. Why is the union willing to strike to help the companies make even more money?”

Pointing to the grotesque levels of social inequality in America, he continued, “The ratio of CEO pay to an average worker’s used to be 14 to 1 and now it’s 350 to 1. You got billionaires like Bezos dismantling a 500-year-old bridge in Rotterdam so he can get his super-yacht through.

“Why not call us all out? If Biden doesn’t support us, we’ll have to find a different party. We know the Republicans are against us. There are millions of us who are not asking to get rich, not asking to dismantle a 500-year-old bridge to get our canoes through. We just don’t want to work 80 hours a week to support our families.”

There is no doubt that Biden and the Democrats, no less than Trump and the Republicans, are on the side of the energy giants when it comes to a battle with workers. During the 2015 strike, President Obama urged the oil companies and the USW “to resolve their differences using the time-tested process of collective bargaining.” This only meant that the Democratic president was looking to the “time-tested” USW bureaucracy—whose president at the time, Leo Gerard, sat on Obama’s corporate competitiveness board—to strangle the strike, which it did.

At the same time, Obama’s labor secretary, Thomas Perez, ordered the International Longshore and

Warehouse Union (ILWU) to shut down a potential strike by 20,000 West Coast dockworkers in February 2015 to prevent them from joining up with striking oil workers and sparking a broader movement in the working class.

Facing an intractable financial crisis and a growing movement of the working class demanding protections against the pandemic and the ravages of inflation, this time Biden has less room to maneuver. While he is certainly relying on the USW again, he is holding in reserve far more draconian measures, including the use of “national security” pretexts to break a strike by oil workers amid the war drive against Russia.

That is why workers must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the USW and build rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-company union, to prepare nationwide strike action. At the same time oil workers must appeal to workers on the railroads, the docks, in factories and warehouses, and educator and nurses in the US, and oil workers internationally, for joint action to defend jobs and livelihoods.

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