

Marathon workers say USW union is sabotaging struggle against oil companies

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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 company's "final offer" and the fight for a nationwide refinery strike.

With the company's largest refinery still incapacitated after a winter power outage, Marathon Petroleum workers say they are in a powerful position to cripple the oil company's operations with a strike and win substantial improvement in wages and working conditions. But they are incensed that the United Steelworkers (USW) union has refused to call a strike and is forcing them remain on the job and help Marathon restore production at its most critical facility, the Galveston Bay Refinery in Texas City, Texas.

Marathon is the lead negotiator in talks with the USW for a new labor agreement covering 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers employed by 12 different corporations. Marathon has been intransigent in its concession demands, presenting a "final" offer that includes 2-3 percent annual raises, under conditions of 7.5 percent inflation. The offer also does nothing to address workers' demands for increased staffing and relief from exhausting and dangerous forced overtime.

The failure of equipment at an electrical substation owned by Texas-New Mexico Power on February 4 knocked out power to 20,000 homes and businesses, including Marathon's 593,000 barrel-a-day Galveston Bay Refinery (GBR) and Valero's Texas City Oil Refinery, which produces 260,000 barrels a day.

Texas City's top emergency manager, Bruce Clawson, credited the quick action and skill by oil workers, who flared, or burned off chemicals, to reduce pressure in vessels at the refineries and prevent "bad explosions."

In a statement to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, Marathon said the restart process would not be finished until February 19, adding that it aims to "slowly bring units back online to minimize emissions." Marathon and Valero released 132,000 pounds of emissions, including nearly 75,000 pounds of sulfur dioxide, into the atmosphere, in one of the largest emission releases in the area in five years.

According to a veteran ExxonMobil worker who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*, a facility-wide power outage is

extremely dangerous and can result in deadly accidents and severe environmental damage. It is extremely difficult to safely close a facility without power to critical instruments to measure the buildup of pressure in vessels that could burst. "It was a level indication malfunction that caused the 2005 BP disaster in Texas City" which killed 15 people, the worker said, noting that the Galveston facility used to be owned by BP (British Petroleum).

He added, "It is a massive effort and a slow and deliberate process to restart a refinery. You have to bring the infrastructure, the steam, water, electricity back online safely. The steam systems are especially susceptible to failure. If they are not brought up slowly, you could have a rupture due to thermal stress. This involves a concerted effort by management to coordinate the start of all these systems, and it can't be done without trained workers. Workers have to bring units up by manually turning valves, watching levels and pumps. It's a delicate balancing act from a cold start. There are issues of plugged lines, leaks from when the units are down, and all kinds of dangerous scenarios."

Shortly after the power outage, a GBR worker told the WSWS in an email: "Luckily, despite the company's tendency to put off necessary maintenance for as long as possible, we were able to safely bring the plant down with no injuries when the power failed. Operations personnel had to do this blind, because the company was too cheap to install and maintain backup generators for their control systems. The facility is still completely shut down and is likely to remain that way for some time. There is no chance they will be able to restart the facility without the hourly workers, but the union still chooses to continue working on 24-hour contract extensions. We couldn't ask for a better position to be in during negotiations, yet USW is unwilling to call for a strike to get us a fair contract."

Refinery workers report that oil companies regularly cut corners on maintenance and repairs to boost profits. This was confirmed by an article by Bloomberg, which reported that planned maintenance was "pushed back in 2020 and 2021 to conserve cash during the height of the pandemic."

Another worker from GBR told the WSWS, "They're forcing employees to work extended hours and their days off to get the facility running again after last week's power outage. USW is

failing to utilize the great opportunity we have to show them how much they actually need us. We should have safely shut the plant down and given them strike notice, but, instead, USW has us standing around holding signs while they force us to restart the refinery. Marathon has refused to come to the table, and USW is fine just waiting until they feel like negotiating again. The union wants us to show our solidarity by coming to these planned ‘actions,’ which accomplish nothing. We have the power to bring these greedy f***ers to their knees, but the USW leadership is unwilling to do anything. We’re going to end up getting a sell-out contract shoved down our throats because these incompetent fools running the show are in bed with the companies.”

A Chevron worker told the WSWs, “It makes me sick to my stomach to think about the negotiating power the union has lost by playing right into Marathon’s hand. There is no way contractors and contingency workers could get a refinery up and running very easily from an issue like that. A refinery that size is roughly 20 percent of Marathon’s daily output. I’m sure at that point Marathon would see the benefit of taking some of the USW demands more seriously. Surely the loss of profits from that refinery alone would make up for the piddly wage increases they presented at the negotiating table. In the grand scheme of the companies’ profits, it’s basically free to them.”

Knowing they could not push through Marathon’s demands without a rank-and-file revolt, the USW was forced to formally “reject” Marathon’s “final” offer on the eve of the contract deadline on February 1. In the two weeks since, the USW has imposed an information blackout. USW President Tom Conway and other officials have not announced what the union’s demands are or even if talks are continuing.

At the same time, the USW has called a series of impotent protests at refineries across the country, including at GBR, even as it systematically disarms workers and strengthens the hands of the corporations.

With oil prices reaching \$90 a barrel and gas prices at the highest level in seven years, Marathon and the other corporations are in no rush to reach a settlement. Marathon recently announced \$9.7 billion in 2021 profits and a \$5 billion stock repurchase plan to boost share values for its investors.

Refinery workers also face a battle against the Biden administration, which is determined to prevent any interruption in gas supplies and a broader movement of the working class against rising inflation. Biden served in the Obama administration, which did the bidding of Big Oil with its kid-gloves treatment of BP after the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill. Obama’s Justice Department also dropped the pursuit of any criminal charges against Tesoro for the 2010 explosion that killed seven oil workers in Washington state.

The USW has a decades-long record of betrayals, including the 2015 oil strike, the isolation and betrayal of the locked out ExxonMobil workers in Beaumont, Texas and striking workers at Specialty Metals in West Virginia and other struggles.

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
- Full staffing levels, the restoration of the eight-hour day and abolition of forced overtime
- Workers’ control over production speed and health and safety, including the fight against the spread of COVID-19 in the refineries
- The end to the lockout of the ExxonMobil workers in Beaumont and the inclusion 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.

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