

“If you are working 13 days in a row, 12 hours or more a day, accidents are bound to happen”

Texas Marathon worker describes intolerable conditions behind growing demands for national strike

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Are you an oil worker? Contact the WSWWS 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.

It has been more than two weeks since the February 1 expiration of the labor agreement covering 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers in the United States. The United Steelworkers union (USW) has kept workers on the job even though the lead negotiator for the oil companies, Marathon Petroleum, has refused to budge from its “final” offer. The company, which made \$9.7 billion in profits last year, is offering raises that are less than half the current inflation rate and has refused to address workers’ demands to reduce health care costs, protect pensions and end exhausting and dangerous work schedules.

Rank-and-file workers are outraged over being kept in the dark by the USW, which has done nothing but stage impotent protests, including at Marathon’s Findlay, Ohio, headquarters on Tuesday. Among rank-and-file workers there is a growing demand for a nationwide strike to win their demands.

The WSWWS recently interviewed a worker at Marathon’s Galveston Bay Refinery in Texas City, Texas, 44 miles southeast of Houston, about the issues in the struggle. The worker used the pseudonym “Tom” to protect himself from retaliation from the company and the USW.

WSWS: What is the mood among oil workers now?

Tom: Workers are angry. This is the first time Marathon is leading the negotiations for the industry. Workers at the company know the way the company is; we expected it to take a hard line. We were not prepared, however, for the United Steelworkers to take this stance. They have kept us in the dark and on the job since February 1. Everybody is ready and willing to show up at rallies and hold up signs and say chants. But we are not getting anything done. Marathon is refusing to come to the table.

The company’s original offer was a 1 percent raise a year, and they refused to discuss pensions or health and safety. As the deadline approached, they raised it to 3 percent a year. But inflation is running at 7.5 percent, and the companies are making huge profits. The oil executives are not giving themselves 2 or 3 percent raises. Marathon CEO Michael Hennigan got a 103 percent raise in 2020 and made \$16 million.

WSWS: What are the main demands of the workers?

Tom: A lot of workers care about the rising costs of health care. Right now, costs are split 80-20 percent between the company and the workers. We want it to be 90-10. We also want to protect our pensions. We have cash balance plans now, but the company is moving towards “enhanced”

401(k) plans, which are much cheaper for them and much worse for us.

There are also health and safety issues. After all the explosions, including the 2005 one here in Texas City that killed so many workers, the company and the union instituted “fatigue management” programs. A lot of us feel this has not gone far enough. The company can still force us to work 13 days in a row, up to 16 hours a day, before we get time off. A typical shift is 12 hours, which is exhausting enough. Right now, maintenance workers are doing 16-hour shifts to get the refinery back up after the power outage.

Under the fatigue program you get a day off after working 13 days in a row, although the contract doesn’t have a “hard trigger” until 21 days in a row. For operators the day off is usually [switching] from nights to days. We work four 12-hour shifts during the daytime one week, followed by another week of three 12-hour nightshifts.

But the way they get around the fatigue plan is when they have “plant emergencies” like COVID, special construction projects or any other “exception” when they need extra manpower. Then they can implement “alternative work schedules.” Technically they are only supposed to work you 12 hours, but they can schedule you for 16 if someone doesn’t show up for work. If that’s the case, you’re working and sleeping pretty much, nothing else.

The company is always running on a skeleton crew, with minimum staffing, and when they have a sudden labor shortage, due to something like COVID, they are not going to reduce rates. It says this is a 590,000 barrel-a-day refinery, and if it doesn’t run 24/7, they’re losing money. It’s hard to have a life outside of the plant. I’ve pretty much missed every Christmas, holiday, birthday and anniversary.

A bunch of my co-workers have spouses in the health care industry, and they’re short-staffed and overworked too. I feel terrible for their kids, they never see their parents. The other day one of my co-workers said he saw his wife for the first time in two weeks. There are not executives working in the refinery on Christmas and missing their kids.

We used to work an 8-hour day, but it changed to 12 hours in the 1980s. The companies did a study and said 12 hours was better because most accidents occur an hour before or after your relief time. So, they decided to provide us with less relief. But if you are working 13 days in a row, 12 hours or more a day, accidents are bound to happen.

When we get together, we say isn’t it tragically ironic that as union workers we don’t enjoy what our brothers and sisters fought for before us—like an 8-hour day and weekends off?

WSWS: What effect has the pandemic had on refinery workers?

Tom: At first, we got email updates through the company reporting every new case and how many workers were on quarantine. Then it turned into every day, there were so many cases. After the lockdowns, everybody who didn't need to turn a wrench was sent to work from home. It was the hourly workers who kept the plant running, and our infection rates were terrible. Every day, we would see the list getting bigger and bigger, and when you went into your work area, you'd find out someone else was sick or being quarantined.

Initially, if someone you worked with tested positive or was even suspected of being positive, the company sent you home for two weeks of quarantine. That changed because they couldn't keep the facility staffed. Then even if you tested positive but were asymptomatic, you had to come to work. No one thinks the company did a good job protecting us. It spoke volumes about what they thought of us, when they sent everybody "important" home to work, and they left us to keep it going.

On top of that Marathon got \$2 billion in CARES Act money from the government in 2020. That was supposed to be used to save jobs after the pandemic hit. They promptly laid off 10 percent of the workforce. The company made out like bandits while COVID spread through the refineries.

WSWS: What are the conditions in the communities where oil workers live?

Tom: The oil and petrochemical industry dominate this region. We know we are working for the bad guys. The oil companies pollute and are behind a lot of wars, but we have families to support, and a refinery job once provided steady, good paying employment.

The companies suppress information about the impact of the refineries' byproducts on health and the environment. As a teenager, I grew up in a part of Texas that had the second highest cancer rate in the country at the time. All the little neighborhoods were just outside of the refinery fences. A lot of them have been bought up by the companies because of all the lawsuits over birth defects, water pollution and high cancer rates. They forced the workers to move out.

The 1980 strike was the last major national oil strike until the last one in 2015. The unions never recovered from the Reagan era. It goes even further back with the Taft-Hartley law and the Red Scare. We had a lot more rights. Now we are facing the systematic oppression of the working class and the destruction of everything earlier generations fought so hard to get.

I'm the third generation of blue-collar union workers in my family. We've seen a huge decline in the working conditions and the number of jobs in the refineries. There is a crazy number of contractors working here. These guys got it even worse than us. In 2017, there were 900 union-represented workers at GBR. Now there are only 700. They just eliminated another 80-90 jobs through attrition.

WSWS: What has been the role of the United Steelworkers union?

Tom: The USW is letting our power and leverage go. The inaction of the USW is so frustrating. We have the power and strength in numbers sharing a common contract, but the USW is making us sit and wait as if Marathon and the oil companies are suddenly going to give us what we ask for. They won't without a fight.

USW Local 13-1 at Galveston Bay Refinery has historically been a pipeline for local union officials to get full-time salaried positions in the USW International. The local officials will get up in a meeting and get everyone fired up, but then they won't buck the International because they want those USW jobs and don't want to work 12 hours a day in a refinery. After years of feeling unrepresented, we had guys run for local leadership against the union rep who had previously been unopposed. There was a huge turnout in the vote. But the vote counting was so opaque and convoluted that the challenger lost by five votes, and the rep who had been in there for years stayed in office.

I don't agree with how nationalistic our union is. BP, Shell and ExxonMobil are global corporations, and we need international solidarity. But the USW even divides us between local chapters, undermining our sense of solidarity and shared purpose. Now they are keeping us in the dark and not telling us anything.

The ExxonMobil workers in Beaumont, Texas, have been locked out for more than nine months. The USW should never have allowed the company to take the Beaumont workers off the National Oil Bargaining agreement. This was planned well ahead of time. ExxonMobil is running the refinery with operators who used to be part of the union, but the USW allowed them to become salaried workers. We should all be out on strike and not go back until we win our demands and the locked out ExxonMobil workers get their jobs back.

The public education system doesn't teach about the history of the labor movement, and politicians like Biden don't even like using the words "working class." They're always talking about "growing the middle class." Then there are politicians like Sanders and AOC who talk about half measures to appease workers who would otherwise be ready to fight for a change. Either you're for the working class, or you're part of the problem.

WSWS: What do you think about the call by the *World Socialist Web Site* for oil workers to form rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of this fight into their own hands?

Tom: I agree with that. The only approach that is going to move the working class forward and earn us the compensation and the working conditions and standard of living that everyone deserves is if rank-and-file workers begin to take the fight into our own hands. We're not getting anywhere with the unions. We need to build up class consciousness and solidarity and get rid of all these artificial constructs that divide us.

These corporations treat workers terribly, even the salaried and frontline supervisors, and we are nothing more than the "help" to the executives. But we're the ones who have kept these refineries running and making them money. There is growing unrest among workers, and more people are beginning to see the big picture that things are not right. We need to stand up for the working class.

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