

United Steelworkers president met with Biden to enforce sellout, block oil strike and back war drive against Russia

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2 March 2022

The United Steelworkers union is marching in lockstep with the Biden administration as it prepares for a direct military confrontation with Russia despite the catastrophic consequences for the world's population. Last Friday, the day after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which was goaded on by the US and the NATO powers, the USW suddenly announced it had reached a tentative agreement for a new labor contract to prevent a strike by 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers.

USW President Tom Conway announced the deal just days after participating in a February 22 virtual meeting with President Biden, Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm and Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks. The event brought together business, union and government officials to discuss increasing US output of lithium and other strategic minerals to counter China's domination of electric vehicle battery production.

Whether Conway was given his marching orders at this meeting or another venue, there is little doubt he was told in no uncertain terms that the Biden administration would not allow an oil workers' strike. A walkout could quickly shut down two thirds of the nation's refinery capacity, right at the point when the administration is trying to ramp up domestic energy production as it escalates the confrontation with Russia.

The USW, which has spent decades colluding with the oil, steel and other corporate bosses to reduce the living standards of workers, did not need any special appeals to oblige the US president. But the integration of the unions into the capitalist state and their utilization to impose labor discipline and suppress internal dissent has reached a new level with the Biden administration's preparation for full-scale war.

Rank-and-file oil workers have told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the USW did not even make a pretense of preparing for a strike in this year's round of National Oil Bargaining negotiations. In 2015, the USW called out 7,000 workers, or less than a quarter of the workforce, in a partial strike that lasted up to eight months before signing concessions contracts. In 2019, supervisors at the refineries were put on split schedules to cover the refineries in anticipation of a walkout, which the USW never called. "This time, the companies did not take any precautions for a strike because they had an agreement with the USW," a Marathon worker at the Galveston Bay Refinery told the WSW.

"At our first local informational meetings a few weeks ago, we were warned that there was a possibility of government intervention should we go on strike due to the threat of war in Ukraine," the worker said. "This was used partially as the basis for the series of impotent publicity stunts we engaged in rather than conducting a full work stoppage. I'm not sure how many of my fellow workers see all these things as related, but they need to know," he said.

The Biden administration has repeatedly stressed that it wants an uninterrupted supply of gasoline from US refineries to limit the spike in

gas prices, which have risen sharply since the crisis in Eastern Europe. "I know this is hard and that Americans are already hurting," Biden said at a press conference shortly before meeting with Conway and the others. "I will do everything in my power to limit the pain the American people are feeling at the gas pump." He added, "We are closely monitoring energy supplies for any disruption."

There is no doubt that this "monitoring" also included a potential strike by oil workers. While holding in reserve "national security" measures to break any such strike, the White House has relied on the USW to block a walkout and impose the dictates of the oil bosses.

As always, behind the puffed-up patriotic blather and the willingness of the ruling class to sacrifice to the last drop of workers' blood lie crude financial calculations. Chevron, ExxonMobil and other US energy monopolies stand to make massive profits as a result of the cutoff of one of their main foreign competitors from world markets, and the corresponding rise in prices. Russia is the world's third-largest oil producer—behind the US and Saudi Arabia—and second-largest producer of natural gas behind the US.

The US corporations will perform their "patriotic duty" by shipping natural gas supplies to Germany and other European countries—which have relied on Russia for 40 percent of their energy needs—for an added fee, of course. No doubt to meet their sacred obligations, workers at Marathon and the other refiners will have to work totally inhuman levels of overtime beyond what they have already been working.

The war is a disaster, not just for the workers of Ukraine and Russia, but for the entire working class. Food prices could skyrocket in the next few weeks. Studies show that oil surpassing \$110 per barrel would lead to US inflation topping 10 percent. But under the USW contract, unanimously backed by the USW Policy Committee, workers will get an annual average annual raise of 3 percent over the next four years, meaning cuts in real wages under this contract could be between 7 and 8 percent.

In other words, the war increases the financial standing of US oil corporations—which made massive profits last year and are handing over a record \$38 billion to their shareholders through stock buybacks—but it will significantly erode the standard of living for the working class.

After four decades of endless US wars based on lies—in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and elsewhere—there is no popular support for another imperialist adventure among workers, who as usual would sacrifice the most, including their sons and daughters.

Aware that the working class is already seething with anger—over social inequality, the ravages of inflation and the criminal disregard for human life that has led to nearly 1 million COVID deaths in the US—Biden is recruiting the USW and other unions to suppress the resistance to capitalist exploitation, austerity and war.

The February 22 White House event

On Tuesday, February 22, Biden delivered a bellicose speech announcing sanctions against Russia and claimed his sole interest was protecting the “sovereignty” of other nations—a principle the US has violated repeatedly for decades.

Less than 90 minutes later, Biden met with Conway and others at the virtual event on “Securing Critical Minerals for a Future Made in America.” According to a White House transcript, the February 22 event began with Biden welcoming the USW president specifically:

THE PRESIDENT: Tom. Tom Conway, you going to say hi to me?

MR. CONWAY: Mr. President, how are you?

THE PRESIDENT: I haven’t seen you in such a long time.

MR. CONWAY: Oh, it’s been a while. You doing all right?

THE PRESIDENT: Yeah, you’re one of the only reasons I’m sitting in this chair. Thank you. (Laughter.)

Biden then welcomed California Governor Gavin Newsom and told him the meeting was too important to cancel despite the escalating crisis in Europe. “We don’t have much going on, you know, other than Russia and Ukraine,” the president said to further laughter about an American provocation that could lead to World War III.

“Almost exactly a year ago,” Biden continued, “I issued an executive order to prioritize strengthening our domestic supply chains. Because what I found out was that, you know, if I was going to follow through on my commitment to say we were going to make it in America and build it America and have all of it built in America, we needed a supply chain that was—that was reliable, including in critical materials like lithium, graphite, rare earth materials, which are badly needed for so many American products...”

The president praised the USW for its agreement with Talon Metal Corporation to jointly “train” workers to mine nickel in northern Minnesota and provide Elon Musk’s Tesla Corporation with a six-year supply of the critical metal for electric battery production. The USW has offered Talon a sweetheart labor deal in exchange for the company’s neutrality in any union organizing campaign.

Biden said his proposals to bring labor, management and the government together to secure supply chains for critical materials would “strengthen our national and economic security.” He complained that “China controls most of the global market in these minerals” and “We can’t build a future that’s made in America if we ourselves are dependent on China for the materials that power the products of today and tomorrow...”

The president also praised Berkshire Hathaway Energy Renewables for building a facility in California to test a new process to extract lithium. It is noteworthy that the Warren Buffett-owned BNSF railroad is imposing a brutal attendance policy on locomotive engineers and other workers to keep the supply chain moving and that it sought and received an injunction from a federal judge to block a strike by 17,000 railroad workers opposing the policy.

Significantly, the White House transcript ended before USW President Tom Conway spoke. This portion of the meeting took place in private, without any reporters present.

The USW-backed deal with the oil giants is the first “national unity” contract under Biden’s wartime presidency. After two years in which a million people died unnecessarily as the government and the unions forced them to work in COVID-infested factories, the “new normal” for hundreds of thousands of West Coast dockworkers, postal workers, railroad workers, teachers and others facing contract expirations will be demands for endless sacrifice to maintain national “unity” against America’s supposed external enemies.

“To me, watching the media and the statement from the White House, it’s like a rerun of the start of the Iraq War in 2003,” the Marathon worker in Texas City, Texas, told the WSWS. “There was an enormous erosion of rights in the wake of 9/11 in the name of ‘national security.’ When they start using that kind of language, it always seems to mean that the working class will have to make sacrifices so the ruling class can keep getting richer.”

Oil workers, coal miners and other energy workers have a long history of opposing wartime anti-strike measures and patriotic hysteria to fight for their needs. During World War I and its immediate aftermath, refinery workers conducted a wave of wildcat strikes for higher wages, improved working conditions, and job security at four of the nation’s major refineries—Standard Oil of New Jersey’s Bayonne, New Jersey, plant in 1915; Gulf Oil’s Port Arthur refinery in 1916; Magnolia Oil’s Beaumont plant in 1919; and Jersey Standard’s Baton Rouge plant in 1920, according to historians Tyler Priest and Michael Botson in their essay, “Bucking the Odds: Organized Labor in Gulf Coast Oil Refining.”

In September 1945, black, white and Mexican immigrant oil workers on the Gulf Coast carried out an industry-wide strike against company demands to maintain wartime levels of production while cutting wages. Although World War II had already ended, President Harry S. Truman said the strike threatened “national security” and ordered the US Navy to take over the refineries. The next day union leaders ordered 43,000 strikers back to work with a government-brokered 18 percent raise.

These militant and class-conscious traditions should inspire the current generation of oil workers. But the situation today is profoundly different than during the first half of the 20th century. The willingness of the American ruling class to part with certain concessions in exchange for “labor peace” ended long ago.

If oil workers won a 15 or 18 percent raise today, the stock market would tank. Today Biden enforces a 3 percent wage limit, which is a cut in real pay, while using the USW as a labor police force to block strike action which might encourage a far broader movement of the working class and interfere with the mobilization for World War III.

The fight oil workers face today poses critical political challenges. They are fighting not just the oil bosses but the US government itself. The fight for the most basic needs of the working class, including decent wages, is bound up with a struggle against war and the squandering of human life and financial resources.

To do this, they must take the conduct of their struggle out of the hands of the pro-capitalist and pro-war USW executives and expand the Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OWRFC) to reject the sellout agreement and prepare a nationwide strike to defend their lives and livelihoods.

But the struggle to oppose capitalist exploitation must be combined with the building of a powerful international anti-war movement, based on the working class and committed to a struggle against the source of war: the capitalist profit system.

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