

Oil refinery workers oppose USW sellout contract

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Are you an oil worker? Contact us to tell us about opposition in your refinery or petrochemical plant to the USW-backed agreement.

Despite the concerted campaign by the United Steelworkers union (USW) to impose a sellout contract dictated by the Biden administration on 30,000 US oil workers, the rank and file are expressing growing opposition to the four-year deal and a determination to fight for their interests.

Although the oil and gas giants have made billions in profits and have benefitted immensely from the spike in oil prices, which has been accelerated by the war crisis in Eastern Europe, the USW is colluding with the Biden administration and corporate management to impose a contract, which would further erode workers' living standards and working conditions.

The agreement includes a 2.5 percent raise in the first year, and an average annual wage increase of 3 percent, even though inflation is running at a 40-year high of 7.9 percent and is rising. The deal does not address increasing out-of-pocket medical expenses for workers and exhausting 16-hour shifts and managerial negligence which lead to accidents, deaths and injuries.

Jeff, an oil worker from Billings, Montana, informed the *World Socialist Web Site* the national agreement is deeply unpopular among workers: "I consider the national package a complete joke. Communication has been terrible at best, and it seems like this bargaining process was a show and probably finished in November or December. These companies make billions, and inflation is hacking away at true income. A raise that's anything less than what inflation is does not constitute a raise. Regardless of what the union reps both local and national say, my vote doesn't change. If they can't address concerns on sick time or wages and won't take the original no vote seriously, I'll have to vote 'no' a

second time."

The USW International ordered a revote at the Phillips 66 refinery in Billings after workers first defeated the contract. Workers report that the deal narrowly passed in the second vote.

Jeff explained how the USW used lies and intimidation at an "informational meeting" to ram the second vote through. "We had a meeting where the national representative essentially told us to vote to ratify both contracts [local and national], but also that we shouldn't have voted on two separate packages and that they should have been voted on as a single package. It's interesting because it was heavily implied that without voting to ratify the contract it would be considered an economic strike, and the company would be free to terminate all the union members and hire who they wanted back without a union or binding contract," he said.

A Marathon worker from Washington state had similar comments, saying, "We are being told that we are the only local that wants to strike, and that if we vote 'no' we will be alone with no USW support, and on an economic strike with no ULPs [Unfair Labor Practices charges from the union]. I'm willing to lose my job if I have to. I'm voting 'no'."

The USW has hung the example of the ExxonMobil workers in Beaumont, Texas, over the heads of workers to threaten them. The union isolated the Beaumont workers during the 10-month lockout at their refinery before signing a sweetheart deal that gutted seniority and job-picking rights and quadrupled the "probationary" period for new workers from 6 to 24 months. This latter has the effect of creating a new tier of lower paid at-will employees who will be used by management to drive out higher-paid senior workers.

At the same time, the Biden administration is

demanding oil companies drastically increase production to counter surging gasoline prices in the wake of the conflict in Ukraine and the embargo on Russian oil. To ensure the continuous flow of oil from US refineries, the Biden administration has worked closely with the USW to prevent any “disruptions” in the US oil supply. The current proposal was conjured up days after President Joe Biden held discussions with USW President Tom Conway. Before then, workers had been kept on the job for three weeks and told that Marathon, the lead negotiator for the oil companies, did not want to come to the table to bargain.

After blocking a strike, USW President Tom Conway boasted the contract proposal “would not add to inflationary pressures.”

An oil worker from Whiting, Indiana, expressed the frustration of workers with the USW’s information blackout on the ongoing vote. “We are so sick and tired of hearing no updates and/or progress in the contract negotiations. Most of us here in Whiting are ready to strike now, and we would give them the 24-hour notice if it was possible. National is controlling us, and we have no say in the matter, and we are ready to rise up and get a contract done by any means necessary.”

Another Washington oil worker said they were frustrated they were paying union dues without getting anything in return.

“Tom Conway needs to go. Basically, this whole union needs to go. They’re not about the workers and have not been for a long time. I’ll give myself a 1.5 percent raise by un-enrolling before I’ll let these pieces of sh*t have any more of my money.”

Notwithstanding efforts to isolate workers and bully them into accepting the sellout contract, oil workers have increasingly expressed their determination to fight against the erosion of their livelihoods. However, workers must understand that they are engaged in a conflict on multiple fronts: against the duplicitous USW, the oil companies that exploit their labor for profit without meeting workers’ most basic demands, and the Biden administration, which is demanding workers bear the brunt of the cost of war and rampant inflation.

The only successful path available to workers requires that they establish their own organizations, independent of the corporatist trade unions and capitalist parties, to link up struggles across the

industry and with other workers in the US and internationally. To this end, workers and the WSWS have established the Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee to provide workers with the information and leadership necessary for the struggles ahead. If you wish to become involved, contact us at oilworkersrfc@gmail.com.



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